Collaboration Corvallis:
A Model for Community-based Problem Solving

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"Town and Gown" – the term often used to refer to the complex dynamic that exists between a university and its host community. For some, it represents the daily frustrations stemming from over-parked streets in residential neighborhoods, or the lack of sleep caused by the most recent round of raucous weekend parties. For others, it reflects a longstanding relationship that generates considerable economic benefits and a stable employment base for the immediate community and surrounding region. Regardless of the lens through which the "Town and Gown" dynamic is viewed, the spectrum of trade-offs it embodies is common among all university towns and dates to the earliest iterations of modern baccalaureate education. So it should not be surprising that the city of Corvallis, Oregon and Oregon State University (OSU) have experienced their fair share of debate on these topics since the university was originally founded in 1868.

In the last six years, however, the balance has shifted to focus on neighborhood livability impacts caused, in part, by recent student enrollment increases. Between fall 2006 and fall 2012, the student population at OSU jumped from about 19,300 to almost 25,000, an increase of roughly 30 percent. The total enrollment growth rate for all other Oregon University System institutions during the same period was closer to 20 percent. In comparison, the city of Corvallis currently has a population of approximately 54,700 people and has experienced an average annual growth rate of roughly two percent over the last 10 years. Based on a comparison of data from the 2000 and 2010 U.S. Censuses, Corvallis experienced a 28 percent increase in the 20-24 year old age segment during that period, an increase of roughly 2,600 people that represents more than half of the corresponding total population increase of 5,140 people. As of 2010, the median age of Corvallis was about 26 years old. The presence of OSU directly affects these demographics. After accounting for the fact that about 20 percent of its undergraduate students live on campus, it's easy to understand why one lens of the "Town and Gown" dynamic is now dominating the debate.

Residential neighborhoods immediately surrounding the OSU campus have experienced the most change as a result of the recent surge in student population. A "perfect storm" created by the combination of low interest rates, a housing sector anxious for work, an unprecedented demand for student housing, and a rental housing vacancy rate stuck at two percent or less has resulted in significant infill development in these neighborhoods within the last six years. In some instances, entire blocks of historic homes have been demolished and redeveloped with three-story apartments containing 20 or more five-bedroom apartments. While the medium and high density zoning designations in these areas were put in place more than three decades ago, their potential to completely reconfigure the character of what are traditionally single family neighborhoods laid mostly dormant until now.

In response to mounting neighborhood frustrations over noise, trash, unruly behavior, over-parked streets, and cut-through traffic, the City of Corvallis and OSU entered into a Memorandum of Understanding on September 29, 2011, which initiated the project now referred to as Collaboration Corvallis. The purpose of this three-year effort is to conduct a community

planning dialog involving multiple stakeholders to explore, craft, and implement strategies aimed at mitigating livability impacts related to the student enrollment trends described above. Overseeing the project is a 16-member Steering Committee composed of executive level leadership from the City of Corvallis and OSU, as well as representatives from OSU student organizations and key community stakeholders. This body provides guidance to three workgroups that are focusing on the general topics of neighborhood livability, parking and traffic, and neighborhood planning. The volunteer, 10-member workgroups were appointed through mutual agreement by Corvallis Mayor Julie Manning and OSU President Ed Ray, and include staff and faculty from OSU with expertise in the relevant topic areas, representatives from affected Corvallis neighborhood associations, members of pertinent community organizations, and OSU students. With assistance from the Joint Management Team, which is made up of the Project Manager, the Corvallis Community Development Department Director, and the OSU Facilities Services Director, it is the task of these workgroups to devise policy recommendations in response to a Scope of Work drafted through coordination between the City of Corvallis and OSU. Recommendations are presented quarterly to the Steering Committee for consideration and adoption, with final implementation to be undertaken by either the City of Corvallis or OSU depending on the nature and scope of the strategies. Recommendation deadlines were established through the Scope of Work, with the goal of implementing initial strategies prior to the start of OSU's fall 2012 term.

After finalizing their appointments, the three workgroups met together for a series of five orientation and public outreach meetings that were held between the beginning of March and the end of April 2012. Since then, each workgroup has met twice a month to craft specific policy recommendations. All meetings are open to the general public, and minutes are taken for later reference and to share with community members who aren't able to attend. A public notice of each meeting is sent via email to an interested parties listserve that was initially compiled during the public outreach meetings, but can now be subscribed to through the City of Corvallis website. All meeting materials are sent to the workgroups in advance of their meetings, and are posted online through the City of Corvallis website, which is connected to a project website (www.collaborationcorvallis.org) maintained through coordination between the Project Manager and OSU staff. Daily contributions of staff time from both OSU and the City of Corvallis continue to be essential for ensuring these various tasks are completed in a transparent manner that facilitates public involvement.

The Collaboration Corvallis workgroups will have been meeting for six months as of this November. During this time they have contributed substantial effort towards re-equilibrating frustrations often associated with "college life" with the benefits derived from a community partnership that has lasted almost 150 years. Policy recommendations under development include:

- various strategies for assisting students to smoothly transition to living off campus;
- possible revisions to the Corvallis Municipal Code and the OSU Student Conduct Code that would help address occasions when that change isn't so smooth;
- programs to encourage increased utilization of public transit that would be jointly managed by the City of Corvallis and OSU;
- multiple coordinated parking management tools; and

- new development standards that could balance the need for more student housing with a desire to preserve existing residential neighborhoods.

The progress made thus far would not have been possible without the commitment from several leaders including the Mayor, City Manager, University President and other key staff from the City of Corvallis and OSU; not to mention members of the community. As Project Manager, it has been rewarding to observe the tenor of workgroup meetings gradually become less agitated as the community begins to realize that viable solutions exist. The initiative shown by OSU and the City of Corvallis to be responsive and proactively devise potential strategies has been equally impressive. Although much work remains to be done, the framework of Collaboration Corvallis demonstrates that community-based problem solving can be exceedingly effective when a partnership is built on trust and mutual respect.

Jim Patterson is the City of Corvallis City Manager. Eric Adams, Project Manager for Collaboration Corvallis, is a private urban planning consultant with over eight years of experience working in Oregon communities. Mr. Adams can be contacted via email at plannext@gmail.com, or by calling him at (541) 971-2456.