

Community Values - Making Choices for Livability by Mike Swaim



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Nobody in their right mind would seek re-election as Salem's Mayor, or so I've been told on more than one occasion, recently. At first, I agreed. So why did I change my mind? For the very same reasons that I convinced myself to run the first time: To keep Salem from becoming the kind of southern California community which we fled in 1978. It is as simple, and as complicated, as that.

When my parents moved to Lakewood, California, south of Los Angeles, in 1950, it was a pleasant community of approximately 50,000, surrounded by orange groves, row crops, and dairies. Not unlike Salem and Keizer, we shared our northern border with the City of Bellflower. There was open space in every other direction. That didn't last long.

By graduation from high school in 1961, all of that was gone. Houses and shopping malls replaced agriculture and open space. By the time I completed my military duty, graduated from college, and obtained my law degree in 1971, nearly every day started with a radio-broadcasted air pollution warning, advising everyone how unhealthy the air was going to be that day, as if we had a choice whether to breath or not; helicopters droned overhead in the evening, looking for criminal conduct afoot; and no matter how wide they made the streets, traffic congestion was the daily norm. We wanted out.

Salem in 1978 was a lot like Lakewood in 1950, only nicer. There was more open space, more forested land, more land devoted to agricultural uses, and abundant wildlife living in close proximity to established neighborhoods. We fell in love with Salem at first sight; gave up my law practice in Long Beach; sold our house; and moved our two children and other worldly possessions to Salem.

Life was good then, even when the economy was not. It was an easy drive across the bridges to the lush green hills of West Salem, a drive that our family took frequently. There were fish in the streams, even the mystical salmon migrated through the heart of town, some even spawning within walking distance of my office.

But things started changing rapidly in the 90's. Houses seemed to spring up everywhere over night. Our streets began suffering from much heavier traffic, during the commute times. Heavy equipment knocked down trees in every direction and gouged heavy scars

into the hills in West and South Salem. Acre after acre of agricultural land succumbed to new subdivisions and industrial parks. I had seen it all before, but didn't much care about it as an 18 year old kid in southern California; I cared a lot about it as a 53 year old resident of Salem.

I kept asking myself: why do they think the result will be any different here than it was in California, when they are doing exactly the same things the same way that they did in California? Didn't someone once define "insanity" as doing the same thing the same way over and over again, and yet expecting a different result? This was insanity reinventing itself in my adopted hometown.

But what could I do about it? I convinced my friend, Roger Gertenrich, to run for Mayor. I trusted him. He ran, was elected, but would not seek a second term. Whom else could I get to run in Roger's place?

The developers put forth their candidate, again, but I could find no one to oppose him. As the very last alternative, I agreed to oppose him, myself. I ran on a campaign that emphasized growth "management," rather than growth "maintenance." I attempted to educate the public on the difference between the two concepts. We were heavily out spent by the opposition, primarily funded by developers and related interests.

I won that election by a slender margin of 933 votes. However, the voters also elected, knowingly or not, councilors who, along with several of the continuing councilors, have a very different view of our community's future. I quickly found myself on the short end of a consistent 6-to-3 vote on growth issues; and, having a substantial majority, those "growth" councilors found no need to compromise.

So I had to have a heart-to-heart talk with myself about whether it made any sense for me to run again. More importantly, would it make any difference whether I did or not?

For awhile I was persuaded that, like my predecessor, Roger, I should just pass the torch along to someone else. However, when I let this be known, there were those that suggested that not running was tantamount to surrendering my ideals to the opposition; that no one who held our point of view had a better chance than me to be elected as mayor.

I became convinced that that was probably true. If I ran, I would probably win; if someone else ran, they would probably lose. Not running was akin to simply giving up on my vision for this community. My younger son, Darrin, put it pretty poignantly by telling me that if I didn't run, it would be the first time in his life that he ever saw me give up on anything. . . .

It was as simple as that, at least to him.

So, I decided not to give up. I decided that the issue of the quality of the lives that we share here in this community is more important than the long and sometime tedious hours that seem an inseparable part of this job.

What would I wish for our community, if I can motivate both the people and our elected representatives? It would be nothing less than what drew me, and probably you, to Salem to begin with: a community where open space is in abundance; where there is plenty of clean water for both people and industry; where history is valued; where crime is managed within tolerable limits; where the quality of life in each of our neighborhoods is elevated above expediency; where youth are supported; and where every member in the community is valued on the basis of the content of their character.

So how does all of that translate into actual policies? In my view, it means that we have to use our land resource within our Urban Growth Boundary efficiently, thereby lessening the pressure to expand that boundary and pave over more farm and forest land. The less land that we need to service growth, the less farmland, forest and open spaces will be lost to urban sprawl in the future.

However, we must be careful to enhance the quality of our environment, while we accommodate better land efficiencies, and that requires careful planning and thoughtful attention to good principles of urban design.

We urgently need to put into place an "end plan," describing in substantial detail what it is that we wish this community to be, not 10 or 20 years from now, but 50 years from now. If we don't create such an end plan, we will continue to react to growth, rather than managing it as it comes into existence.

There are those who accuse me of either being foolish or arrogant to believe that we could "know" what this community will be like 50 years hence. They miss the point by miles. Someone once said "The best way to predict the future is to plan for it." I believe very strongly in that principle. We should not wait to see what indiscriminate growth brings us over the next 50 years. We should get about the process of creating the future we want for our community over the next 50 years, through comprehensive planning now, and then make sure that we are building towards that vision.

Some people are unable to contemplate a plan that says "We will build to here, but no further." They say that growth cannot be confined to a particular area. However, all they need to do is visit southern California and take note of the fact that when communities

grow hard against each other, it is just as if somebody has said "We will grow to here and no further," except that in allowing it to happen in that fashion, these communities paved over all of their surrounding agricultural and open spaces. Is that the result we want for Salem? I trust not.

We should zealously work to preserve at least our present quality of life for our grandchildren, and their grandchildren as well. However, with every day that passes without such an end plan in place, we irreversibly commit more of our land, water, and air resources to the kind of future that defines southern California communities today.

And speaking of water, I want us to firmly commit ourselves to the protection of our existing water supply, which is only possible by protecting our national forest watershed east of town. We should not have to tolerate dirtier drinking water because of poor timber harvesting practices in national forests that we, in fact, own.

I would also want to protect and preserve our historic structures. There is something magical about being able to see, touch, and roam about in buildings that pre-date the turn of the 20th Century. It gives us a sense of "roots," even if they are adopted roots. It gives us a sense of place and continuity, an understanding of the order into which we fit in the scheme of things in this community. Our historic structures are a defining element of our collective soul; they provide content to what it means to be a Salemite.

I would elevate the importance of our neighborhoods in our planning for the future. For it is in our neighborhoods where city policies affect real people, and define what "quality of life" really means on a day-to-day basis. We must not sacrifice the quality of life in existing neighborhoods in order to serve the interests of development on the outskirts of town. Additions to our city should make the community better off, rather than damaging existing neighborhoods; otherwise, what's the point?

We also need to protect and promote other important assets which make life so enjoyable here: our outstanding library, our beautiful parks, the abundance of trees throughout the core and in every neighborhood, and our good public schools. We must not become complacent about the future of any of these important assets, lest they be damaged in the blink of an eye.

We must also be vigilant to see that each of us has a fair and equal opportunity to enjoy all of what our community has to offer, without regard to race, culture, religion, sexual orientation, or economic class. We must work harder to affirm the basic dignity of each of us in this community, based only on the content of our character.

Finally, we've got to make our youth a real focus of our effort to successfully sustain ourselves as a community into the 21st Century. With youth vandalism and violence on the rise, it is apparent that there is something seriously wrong with the way we are fulfilling the most basic function of any community: to successfully perpetuate itself by teaching its youth what it means to be good citizens.

Because the cost of living has far outstripped the rise in real wages since the 1950's, many, and perhaps most, families require that both parents be employed full-time. This means that thousands of our children are coming home to empty houses after school.

We also know that most youth crime and teen pregnancy occurs between the hours of 3 and 6 p.m., Monday through Friday. Understanding that, we must seriously invest sufficient resources to provide our youth with a broad variety of activities, as well as places to simply "hang out," in every neighborhood, so that there is constructive activity available for every child in our community during that high risk time period.

We have a shared responsibility to make certain that every child has the opportunity to learn what it means to be a worthwhile and contributing citizen in this community. We owe this obligation not only to those children and their families whom we know, but, perhaps more importantly, also to those in our community that we don't yet know. They are an important part of our community.

It will be expensive to reverse the trends that we have seen developing amongst our teenagers over the last several decades. Moreover, no one program, regardless of how well designed, will provide all of the answers. The problem is complex and subtle; the solutions will necessarily be just as complex and subtle. However, we must get as serious about the prevention of crime as we have been about punishment for crime. Ultimately, the answer is not in building more cells, but creating fewer criminals to house in those expensive accommodations in the first place.

So there you have, at least in skeletal form, my hopes for our community's future. We have all chosen to come here, or chosen to remain here, because we believe that life in Salem is measurably better than life would be in other areas of this country. That being so, we must exert every ounce of our effort to preserve and protect the essence of our quality of life, which ultimately defines what it means to be a resident of Salem. That will take the wisdom of many, rather than the influence of a few, if we hope to be successful. I want to be a part of that visioning process, and it is important for you to be a part of it, too.

Mike Swaim is the Mayor of Salem, Oregon. He is married to Kellie Swaim and they have two sons, Matt and Darrin. A Family Practice Attorney for 27 years, he and his family have

lived in Salem for the last 20 years. He is seeking re-election in May, this year.



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