

## Opinion/Column

### Farsightedness at the Polls: It Can Happen, Returns Show

**By Neal Peirce**

Can today's Americans make wise choices for the futures of their communities? Accept some current pain for gains down the road? Think long-term?

Too often, the answer seems "no." Although in a string of referendum votes across the country last week, glimpses of refreshing far-sightedness shone through.

Take Charlotte/Mecklenburg County in North Carolina. Voters, by a 70 percent to 30 percent margin, turned down a tax repeal that would have truncated the region's first light rail system, set to open this month, and imperiled much of Charlotte's bus service in the process.

The vote marked a huge victory for Charlotte Mayor Pat McCrory, a Republican who also won his seventh two-year term as mayor. A firm believer in public transit alternatives to the auto traffic engulfing his region, McCrory in 1998 campaigned for a half-cent sales tax add-on to finance the rail system and bus improvements.

But the conservative wing of his own party, plus anti-rail advocates, seized on cost overruns that developed while building the transit line, plus some mismanagement during construction, to mount this year's tax repeal bid. For a while, it seemed they might win.

McCrory was able to re-energize his 1998 business-civic coalition and convince a big majority of voters—Republicans and Democrats alike—to keep public transit strong and growing in fast-expanding Charlotte.

The 70 percent favorable vote, he told me, "sends a strong signal that people want to prepare for the future rather than react to it. They also made a strong choice for mobility."

Maine voters took a similar pro-future stance, approving (albeit narrowly) a \$50 million economic development bond issue. Instead of politically geared earmarks, the money's to go to promising new economic clusters that the independent Maine Technology Institute rates high for job creation and potential growth.

And rather than tired "smokestack chasing" or "another call center," the money should promote clusters with solid Maine potential—for example, boatbuilding, composites, forest fibers or marine sciences—says Karen Mills, the venture capitalist who put the bond-proposal package together based on a Brookings Institution analysis of Maine's possible economic growth strategies.

In Oregon, the Election Day issue was property rights—more specifically, whether an initiative passed in 2004 went overboard in giving developers and corporate landowners the right to build on lands the state wanted to protect.

Oregon has long been famed for its sweeping system of rural and scenic land preservation, inaugurated in 1973 under the now legendary environmentalist, Gov. Tom McCall. But in 2004, property rights advocates proposed and won a big ballot victory for a so-called "regulatory takings" measure. Either landowners would be allowed to build anything legal when they first bought their property, or government would have to compensate them for their unrealized profits.

The initiative was sold on fairness grounds—to let small individual landowners build a few houses on property they’d long owned. But it triggered a rush by big-scale property owners, several timber companies included, to cash in. No less than 7,500 claims for development, covering more than 750,000 acres and 2,700 subdivisions, were filed. Big-box stores, strip malls, a one-million-square-foot shopping mall, and a rock blasting operation appeared in the offing.

So in a big act of buyers’ remorse, Oregonians reversed course, passing, 61 percent to 39 percent, a new initiative. Individual landowners will be allowed up to three, and in some cases 10, houses on properties they’ve long held. But big subdivisions, shopping centers, and industrial plants will be forbidden on protected lands.

The environmental group 1,000 Friends of Oregon mobilized 10,000 volunteers and 5,000 donors for the reform measure. Big numbers of legislators, Gov. Ted Kulongoski, Oregon’s AFL-CIO, and even some progressive timber firms joined the effort.

“The measure does introduce additional fairness to people with reasonable expectation of building a house for their kids,” notes Robert Liberty, Portland metro councilor and former leader of 1,000 Friends. But, he adds, it protects “vibrant growing cities” and “a countryside combining beauty and utility—a landscape people love. Oregon has now voted seven times on its planning effort; we’re saying clearly we will stick with it.”

In the Seattle region, by contrast, it may be new protections that voters want. Notwithstanding big-time local road congestion, they decisively defeated an \$18 billion transportation package for 180 lane-miles of highway and 50 miles of light rail. Why? Taxes, said many. The forced marriage of road and transit advocates, said others.

But something new may have factored in—voter concern about climate change. King County Executive Ron Sims opposed the measure, expressing special concern about greenhouse gas emissions. Just maybe, suggests Eric de Place of the Seattle-based Sightline Institute, future transportation packages will have to include clear climate accounting.

The moral seems clear: Those who propose to voters need good judgment and technical savvy. But also, it’s appearing, vision of a sounder and safer future.

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