



Making Sustainability Legal: Outdated Rules that Stop Affordable, Green Solutions

Executive Summary

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Some of the most innovative solutions for building thriving and sustainable communities in the Northwest are, at present, simply *illegal*.

Rules on the books currently make it more difficult to share bikes, find a taxi, reuse pickle jars, take toddlers on a bus and, in some places, hang a clothesline. Some require companies to deliver outdated products that no one wants, or to infuse them with unnecessary chemicals. Others work against smart economic incentives, like allowing people who only drive a little to pay less for car insurance.

Even the best-intended rules become outdated. From buggy whips and typewriter ribbons to the stuff forgotten in the back of your fridge, almost everything has an expiration date. Luckily, weeding out rules that are now counterproductive and irrelevant can have a big impact—making it cheaper and easier to do the right thing.

In June 2011, Sightline launched the [Making Sustainability Legal project](#). Although the Northwest could benefit from a top-to-bottom remodel of its public-policy house, deep political divides and starvation budgets make big reforms unlikely soon. In the meantime, maybe we can clean out the fridge.

Making Sustainability Legal is about pulling moldy regulations out of the back of our law books and composting them. Whatever virtue they may have had in their prime, dozens of regulations now do little but block Northwesterners from adopting affordable, common-sense, green solutions.

Sightline has since completed case studies on 16 rules that are long past their sell-by dates:

1. [Democratizing Trails](#): Outfitting rules and dwindling budgets keep working-class and inner-city kids from enjoying the Northwest's national forests.
2. [Unleash Personal Car Sharing](#): An obscure change in insurance regulations stands in the way of making money on your car's idle hours.
3. [Delivering Ourselves from Unwanted White Pages](#): State law requires phone companies to litter your doorstep with the White Pages, even if you ask them not to.

4. [Decriminalizing Green, Affordable Car Insurance](#): State rules make it difficult for insurance companies to charge by the mile or give people who drive less a break on their rates.
5. [Unfettering Food Carts](#): A thicket of city codes stunts the growth of food carts in Seattle and Vancouver, BC.
6. [Exempting Bars from Parking Requirements](#): Nearly every city and town in North America bans drunk driving but requires bars to provide parking.
7. [Repealing Bans on Clotheslines](#): Homeowners and condo associations continue to ban clotheslines, even when state law says they can't.
8. [Letting Cities Slow Traffic](#): State law tangles cities that want to lower speed limits and improve street safety in red tape.
9. [Allowing Communities to Innovate for Clean Water](#): Arbitrary state limits require cities to spend billions to fix combined sewer overflows, when cheaper stormwater investments could also reduce pollution.
10. [Freeing Taxes](#): Cities' rules that cap the number of available taxicab licenses create high fares, low availability, and a barrier to greener urban travel.
11. [Unchaining Bike Sharing](#): Mandatory helmet laws are the single biggest barrier to creating public bike sharing programs.
12. [Replacing an Unsafe Fire-safety Test for Couches](#): California's 12-second-rule coats your furniture with toxic chemicals, and won't keep your house from burning down.
13. [Getting Out of Work's Way](#): State rules that require thousands of hours of cosmetology training for African hair braiders are onerous, and arguably racist.
14. [Welcoming Strollers on Transit](#): Transit rules that require parents of young children to fold strollers on buses get in the way of car-free families.
15. [Liberating Couchsurfing](#): Renting out a room in your house shouldn't be like harboring fugitives, or paying taxes as a hotel.
16. [Legalizing Used Pickle Jars](#): National codes prevent stores from sanitizing and reusing food containers.

The Making Sustainability Legal project is continuing to check the expiration dates on a slew of regulations. By updating or eliminating rules that should have died long ago, we can pursue smarter solutions that fit today's reality, and the Northwest can grow more affordable, fair, and sustainable.

About Sightline Institute

Sightline Institute is a not-for-profit research and communication center—a think tank—based in Seattle. Sightline's mission is to make the Northwest a global model of sustainability—strong communities, a green economy, and a healthy environment. Sign up for email news and updates at <http://www.sightline.org>.

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Read the full report: <http://www.sightline.org/research/making-sustainability-legal>