



## Rural Sprawl in Metropolitan Portland

### A comparison of growth management in Oregon and Washington

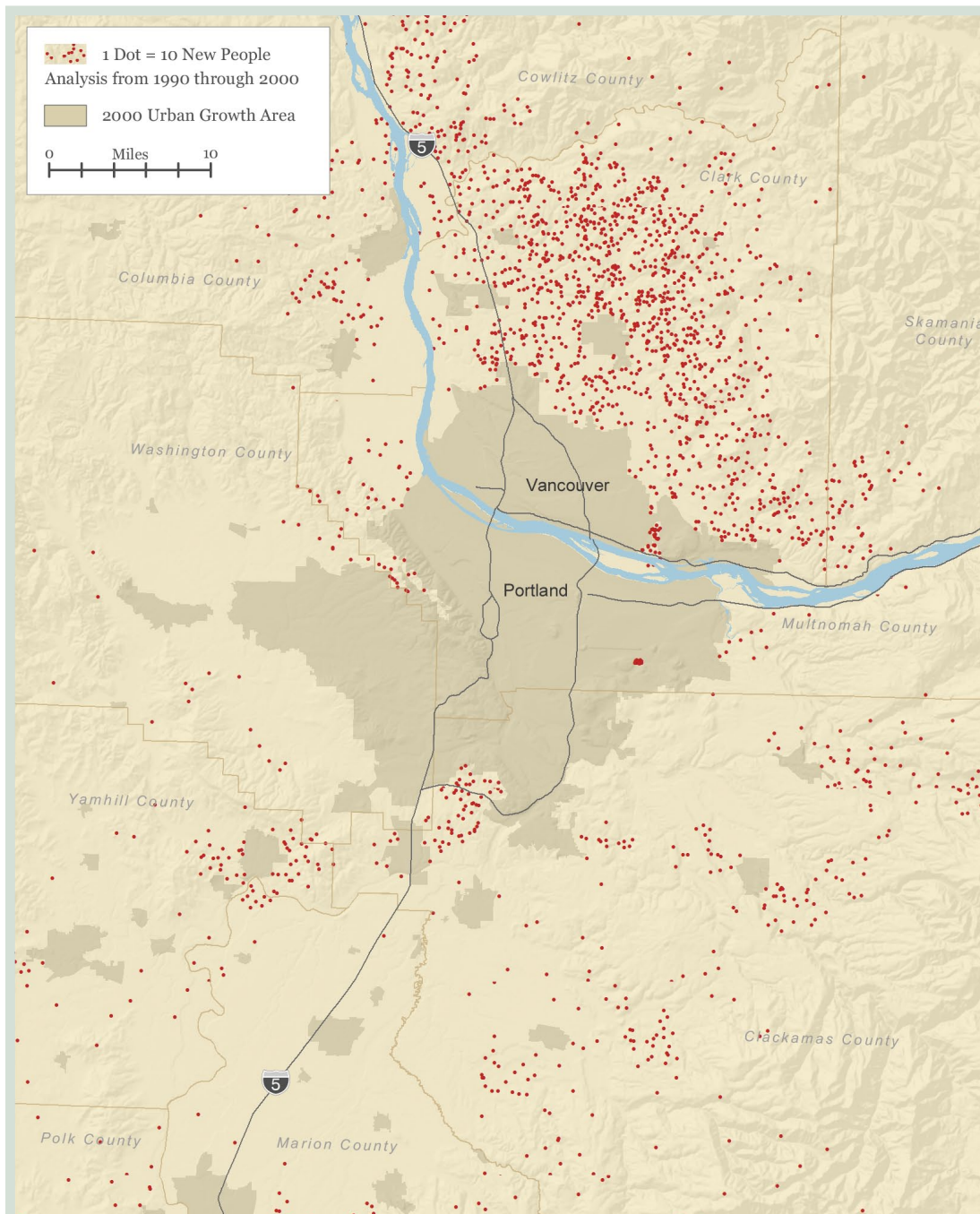
Clark Williams-Derry

July 2012

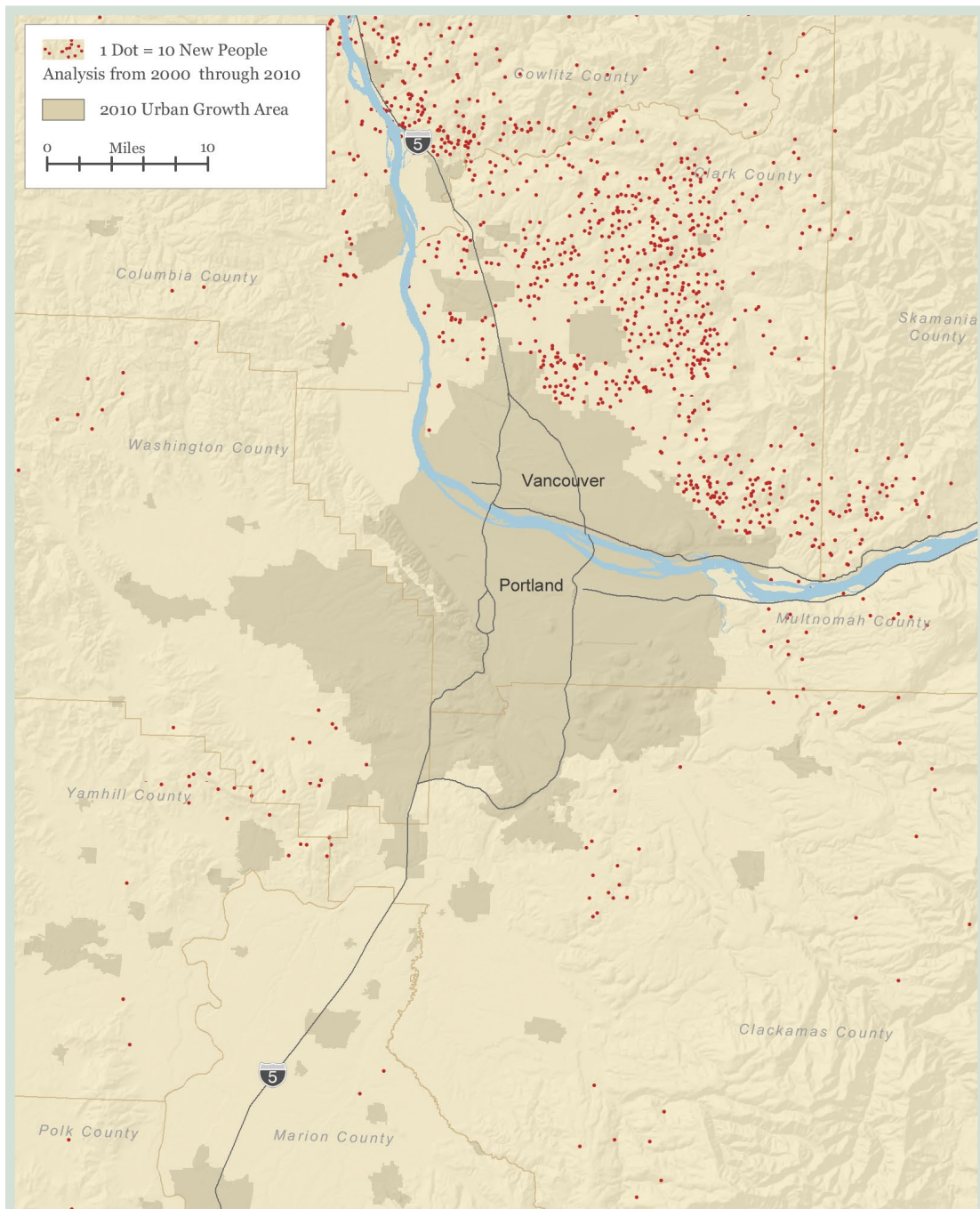
As a single metropolis split between two states, greater Portland, Oregon, offers an intriguing natural experiment for gauging the effects of different growth management regimes. The Oregon side of the metro area operates under the nation's oldest and most mature growth management system, established in the 1970s. The smaller but fast-growing Washington side of the metro area is governed by a newer growth management law. On paper, the two states' growth management programs share many features; in practice, their records have diverged. Over the last two decades, **Clark County, Washington, accounted for the large majority of all rural and exurban housing and population growth in the greater Portland area.**

As **Figure 1** shows, between 1990 and 2000, Clark County had much more exurban population growth than did neighboring Oregon counties. Of course, Clark County's growth management rules did not come into effect until the mid-1990s; and those rules "grandfathered in" a substantial amount of development that had been planned before the law came into effect. It is possible, then, that Clark County's performance during the 1990s largely reflected development that was planned or completed before the county's growth management laws came into effect.

However, **Figure 2**, which covers the period between 2000 and 2010, reveals strikingly similar growth patterns to those of the prior decade: Clark County's exurbs and rural areas added far more new residents than did the counties in the Oregon portion of the metro area. Although the pace of rural sprawl slowed on both sides of the Columbia, Clark County allowed far more growth outside urban boundaries than its Oregon neighbors did.

**Figure 1. Exurban Population Growth, Metropolitan Portland, 1990-2000**

Clark County's rural areas added thousands of new residents in the 1990s—in part because growth management laws didn't come into full force until mid-decade.

**Figure 2. Exurban Population Growth, Metropolitan Portland, 2000-2010**

Rural sprawl slowed on both sides of the Columbia after 2000. Yet Clark County's rural areas still saw substantial population growth over the decade, while Oregon's rural areas did not.

Two divergent trends affected population growth in exurban Portland from 2000-2010: the number of houses increased over the decade, while the average number of people per household *declined*.

In the exurbs of the three Oregon counties in metropolitan Portland, the number of housing units increased only modestly from 2000 through 2010 (see Table 1). This growth was largely offset by a decline in household size (see Table 2). On net, then, those three counties saw modest, scattered, and highly localized population growth over the decade.

But in Clark County, Washington, the exurban housing stock increased substantially between 2000 and 2010. All told, Clark County accounted for more than three out of five new exurban homes in the entire 4-county region, even though the county accounted for less than 30 percent of that region's total housing growth. In fact, nearly one-tenth of all new homes in Clark County over the decade were built outside the urban growth boundaries. The rapid growth in Clark County's exurban housing supply overwhelmed the modest decline in average household size, leading to significant population growth throughout the county's exurbs.

***Clark County's exurban housing trends cannot be attributed simply to rapid rates of overall growth.***

Clark County's exurban housing trends cannot be attributed simply to rapid rates of overall growth. Considering areas both inside and outside the urban growth boundaries, Multnomah County, Oregon added more total new housing units in the 2000s than did Clark County, Washington. Similarly, Washington County, Oregon added more new residents than did Clark County. But those two Oregon counties added only a tiny share of their new housing outside the urban growth boundary. Clark County experienced comparable amounts of overall growth as those two Oregon counties, yet the county's growth management rules allowed significantly more exurban housing development.

The data from greater Portland's "natural experiment" suggests that low-density exurban development is not an inevitable result of growth. Instead, the contrasting records of the Oregon and Washington sides of the Portland metro area offer a clear lesson: rural sprawl results from policy choices. Differences in how land use and zoning policies are designed and enforced—rather than differences in demand for new housing per se—lie at the heart of the different exurban housing and population trends in Greater Portland.

**Table 1. Exurban housing grew modestly in the 3-county Oregon portion of the Portland metro area, but boomed in Clark County, Washington.**

	Housing units outside 2010 UGB		
	2000	2010	Change, 2000-2010
Clackamas County, OR	31,869	33,320	5%
Multnomah County, OR	4,028	4,240	5%
Washington County, OR	9,760	10,179	4%
Clark County, WA	18,134	21,382	18%

**Table 2. Household size decreased throughout the metropolitan Portland exurbs.**

	People per housing unit outside 2010 UGB		
	2000	2010	Change, 2000-2010
Clackamas County, OR	2.55	2.38	-6%
Multnomah County, OR	2.56	2.43	-5%
Washington County, OR	2.71	2.54	-6%
Clark County, WA	2.91	2.79	-4%
4-county region	2.68	2.54	-5%

**Method notes**

The maps and data on which this report is based were produced by CORE GIS, a Seattle-based geographic information systems consulting firm. Exurban lands were divided into a mosaic of arbitrary but comparably sized polygons. In some of these polygons, total population decreased over the decade—probably because of a decline in average household size. Where possible, we merged polygons in which population declined with adjacent polygons in which population grew, to create larger polygons with more modest population change. Each red dot represents a net addition of 10 residents somewhere within the polygon containing that dot—and therefore represents an approximation of the actual location of net population growth, rather than the precise point where population increased. All population counts are from the US Census. For more information on methods, please contact Sightline Institute.

The precise reasons for Clark County’s record remain outside the scope of this report. Further analysis would be needed to determine the relationship between specific zoning policies and exurban development. In particular, some of Clark County’s exurban growth from 2000 to 2010 may have resulted from proposed development that was “grandfathered in” when Clark County’s growth management policies came into full force in the mid-1990s.

### **About the Author**

**Clark Williams-Derry** is Director of Programs at 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.

### **Contact:**

**Clark Williams-Derry**, Director of Programs  
Clark@sightline.org