**“Glen’s Parallax Perspectives”** is a series of TV programs that offer fresh ways for people to see issues such as foreign policy, social and economic justice, governmental functioning, and so forth. We provide voices and viewpoints that are rarely heard in mainstream media.

Mainstream media, politicians, and culture see the world in conventional ways. The Establishment is stuck in how they see the world. In order to solve problems, we need to see things differently. Glen Anderson created this TV series to help people see things differently so we can solve problems at all levels from the local to the global.

This series title refers to “Parallax Perspectives.” **Parallax** is the view you get by looking from different perspectives. For example, put one finger in front of your nose and another finger farther away. Close one eye. Then open that eye and close the other. Your fingers will seem to move. This is called a “parallax” view. This TV series invites you to look at issues from fresh perspectives.

Each program airs three times a week (currently every Monday at 1:30 pm, every Wednesday at 5:00 pm, and every Thursday at 9:00 pm) for the entire month on Thurston Community Television (TCTV), channel 22 for Thurston County’s cable TV subscribers. You can see TCTV’s current schedule at [**www.tctv.net**](http://www.tctv.net). This is part of Thurston County Media,[**www.tcmedia.org**](http://www.tcmedia.org).

You can also watch the program described below through [**www.parallaxperspectives.org**](http://www.parallaxperspectives.org) All episodes of “Glen’s Parallax Perspectives” are posted on the “TV Programs” part of that blog and also in one or more of the categories listed in the right side of the computer screen. Also, see much information about a variety of issues at my blog, [**www.parallaxperspectives.org**](http://www.parallaxperspectives.org).

🡪 Please invite other people to watch this program through video at the “TV Programs” part of [**www.parallaxperspectives.org**](http://www.parallaxperspectives.org) and/or read this thorough summary there.

🡪 See sources of information near the end of this document.

**Here is this month’s program:**

**May 2018**

**“Hidden Costs of Local Population Growth”**

by Glen Anderson, producer and host of the TV series “Glen’s Parallax Perspectives”

The May 2018 episode of “Glen’s Parallax Perspectives” interviews two very knowledgeable guests who have been volunteering skillfully to help protect the broad public interest in matters of local public policy.

Typically, local communities assume that they are supposed to grow in population. Local population growth is promoted as good for us, but the promoters avoid disclosing the real costs – the hidden costs – of local population growth. This interview explores the costs of such growth. Although some of our examples come from the greater Olympia area, the principles pertain elsewhere too.

The City of Olympia expects 20,000 more people here in the next 20 years. Who will pay for the roads, sewers, schools, parks, police and fire services, and so forth? Should growth pay its own way, or should all of the rest of us pay for it – in effect, subsidizing the real estate developers? Also, how will we deal with the non-financial costs, such as the increased noise, traffic congestion, and visual clutter?

Two guests help us explore this. I have known and respected them for about 30 years:

* **Jim Lazar** has worked as a professional economist since the 1970s. He specializes in energy issues but also knows a huge amount about local government and other issues too.
* **Bob Jacobs** had a long career as a public policy analyst for state government. He was widely appreciated as the mayor of Olympia and has continued serving the public interest as a well informed and vigorous volunteer.

**The assumption that endless growth (in economics or any other sector) is good**

Many people assume that history is linear – going in one direction – and that the direction should always be upward – everything more and bigger: more economic activity and more people in the local community. The buzz-words are “growth” and “development.”

Jim commented on the assumption that “growth” and “development” are always good. He said there are benefits but also costs. We enjoy improving our natural environment, expanding our parks and cultural opportunities, and so forth. But growth also imposes costs for roads, sewers, new court houses, bigger police departments, more fire engines, and so forth. “If the growth gets ahead of the cost recovery, then the quality of life deteriorates” because we won’t have enough police and firefighters to respond to emergencies, not enough school capacity for a high quality education, and so forth.

Glen agreed and said that research has shown that when the tax revenue is not adequate to meet the needs, the quality of service will suffer.

**The assumption that population in our local community should – and must – increase**

Our conversation focused on what happens when more people move into our local community. Various entities estimate how many people will move here. Local governments accept those growth projections at face value and start planning. Local planning not only tries to accommodate the assumptions but also tries to make those assumptions sound good.

Bob said the official population projection is that 20,000 more people will be in Olympia 20 years from now. He said that is a 40% increase.

**Non-financial benefits of local population growth**

Bob said that there are some **non**-financial **benefits** when more people live in a local community. We commonly think of the financial costs and the non-financial costs (pollution, traffic congestion, etc.). But there are some non-financial benefits (arts, museums, medical resources, etc.) that larger cities offer beyond what smaller towns can offer.

Jim said when he moved to Olympia decades ago, Olympia’s entertainment was typified by bowling leagues and slow-pitch softball. He would have to drive to Seattle to get high quality arts (although the drive took only one hour then). Now Olympia has a vibrant and varied music scene. Now the ballet comes to Olympia so he does not have to drive to Seattle to see it. He used to go to Seattle very often (perhaps once every two weeks), but now perhaps only once a year. Olympia’s recent growth has increased cultural benefits here locally.

**Non-financial costs of local population growth**

A moment ago Bob mentioned pollution and traffic congestion as two examples of **non**-financial **costs** that come along with local population growth. Now he also mentioned more stormwater runoff into Puget Sound, more water pollution and air pollution, and more noise.

Glen mentioned visual clutter and thanked Bob for his efforts and a local non-profit organization’s efforts to remove the 9-story eyesore on Olympia’s isthmus and protect the waterfront views. Bob added that the City of Olympia is reworking its rules about signs, another aspect of visual clutter.

Jim said generally larger cities have higher crime rates than smaller towns. He said that a recent survey showed that most people feel uncomfortable walking in downtown Olympia at night. He said that when he moved here decades ago he would be all alone if he were downtown at night. Now people are downtown at night. Glen said that whereas in a small town people know each other, in a bigger city there is more social anxiety among strangers.

**The “jobs” propaganda and rebuttals**

When people advocate for more local population growth, they keep saying it will “create jobs.” Bob said the “jobs” angle is largely a cover promoted by people who financially benefit from more population growth. It’s true that a wider variety of jobs will occur, but the better jobs tend to go to people who move here from outside of the community. For example, he said, Seattle’s technology sector has added many highly skilled jobs that have seriously worsened Seattle’s housing and traffic problems, but people from elsewhere came to Seattle to fill those high-paying jobs. Local people got the low-paying jobs that were created to serve those people.

Bob said that every political candidate from dog-catcher to president talks about “jobs.” But actually a city can’t really do much about “jobs.” The federal government can decide to spend more to create jobs. He said we need to look at the downside as well as the positive side.

Glen mentioned growing up in Everett and exposing the deceptive “jobs” argument that was promoted when Boeing decided to create a huge plant at the south end of town to build 747s. Glen said those jobs would go to people arriving from out-of-town, and it would skew the city and the city’s economy away from downtown toward the south end. That is exactly what happened. A big new mall there caused downtown to suffer.

**Financial costs of local population growth**

Eben Fodor conducted serious research on “The Cost of Growth in Washington State” for the Columbia Public Interest Policy Institute ([**www.columbiapolicy.org**](http://www.columbiapolicy.org)) and published a smart report in October 2000.

Jim summarized some main points. Population growth forces us to add capacity to our infrastructure in order to maintain our quality of life. Adding the required infrastructure is expensive. He listed road system capacity, water system capacity, sewer system capacity, and more schools and parks. He said Olympia built a new City Hall that was bigger than the previous one, which in turn had been bigger than the one before it. This was necessary because the city has been growing.

He said that in order to pay for the costs of growth, we either have to charge the new developments or charge the existing residents. If nobody pays for the costs of growth, the quality of services will suffer.

Bob said there are **three kinds** of costs.

**One kind is the government’s current operating costs** (salaries of teachers and fire-fighters, patching potholes, etc.). These costs are paid by all people (current and new arrivals) through property taxes, sales taxes, etc. Therefore, governmental operating costs are indeed paid fairly by the growth that is occurring, along with residents who already lived here.

**A second kind is the costs on-site within the new development.** If a developer builds 80 houses on 20 acres, the developer is required to build the necessary water lines, sewer lines, fire hydrants, roads (within the development). These must meet the local government’s standards, and they are turned over to the local government and become public property.

**A third kind is the costs that occur outside of the new development**, but that become necessary only because the new development has been built. These are the kinds of costs Jim had mentioned just now: schools, bigger streets, more sewer treatment plant capacity, more police and firefighters, libraries, court houses, jails, and so forth. These **off-site** costs are required to accommodate the new population growth. These are **not** routinely paid for by the developers.

While the developer and the people who buy those houses pay for the **on-site** costs, the **off-site** costs are passed along to the rest of us.

So Bob said that when Olympia grows from 50,000 to 70,000 people, who will pay for those **off-site** costs? He said state laws allow only some of those costs to be charged to the developers of those houses and office buildings. He and Jim and a local non-profit organization (the Carnegie Group, which we mentioned a few minutes later; see below) want growth to pay for growth much more than it does now.

Costs have grown a lot in recent decades. Bob said until a sewage treatment plant was built in 1951, Olympia’s sewage simply went into a pipe and was dumped into the bay. Sewage treatment plants and other infrastructure are expensive, and the costs need to keep up with the growth. Starting in 1959 a few state laws came along that allow (but do NOT require) local governments to charge developers for a few (NOT all) of the costs of growth. Examples include water and sewer connection fees, impact fees for schools, streets and parks. However many of the costs of growth (police, libraries, city halls, etc.) are NOT covered by impact fees. Those costs are “externalized” so the rest of us pay for those.

Bob pointed out that when an increasing local population requires more schools, only some of that cost is paid locally, while some of the cost is paid by the state government – all state taxpayers. For political reasons, some local governments decide not to make developers pay what they could be paying, so the balance of those costs are paid by the general population.

Glen said it is very likely that a great many local jurisdictions around the country are not making growth pay for growth, so – even while our local community falls short of that – probably the vast majority of local communities nationwide are really very negligent in this. Jim said only about half of the states even allow for impact fees, and even within those states many local communities fail to charge them. He said that although Olympia, Tumwater and Lacey do try to recover some costs of growth, Thurston County did not do that until just four years ago. He said that a lot of new construction was occurring in peripheral areas sprawling outside of the urban growth boundary areas because the development fees have been lower there.

Jim said the City of Olympia had impact fees for firefighting capability, but about nine years ago the voters approved a bond issue to build a fourth fire station. This increased the property taxes for everybody, not just those people who lived in the areas where growth had been occurring and creating this additional need. With the additional tax revenue from this bond issue, the City of Olympia eliminated the impact fees that had been dedicated to firefighting. As a result, the new houses being built today are hitchhiking on an investment that all taxpayers had funded, instead of paying impact fees from their new growth. In a few years those bonds will be paid off and we will not have impact fees to provide funding for firefighting capacity.

**Who should pay for local population growth? Olympia’s Carnegie Group is a non-profit organization that wants growth to pay for growth.**

We have been discussing several kinds of costs that are caused by local population growth, and we have been discussing who should pay for local population growth.

Both Jim and Bob are active in a local organization, the Carnegie Group, which says “Growth Should Pay for Growth.” The Carnegie Group meets every Monday at 5:15 pm on the second floor above Anne Buck’s spice shop, Buck’s Fifth Avenue, at 209 5th Avenue SE, across from the Capitol Theater in downtown Olympia. Their website is [**www.CarnegieGroup.org**](http://www.CarnegieGroup.org) or [**www.oly-wa.us/CarnegieGroup**](http://www.oly-wa.us/CarnegieGroup) The website is a few years out of date, but it does give examples of the kinds of issues they deal with. They do an excellent job of paying attention to local public policy and environmental issues and taking appropriate actions.

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**Impact fees paid through mortgages are a smart way to go**

Jim mentioned that impact fees are built into the cost of new houses, so the new homeowner pays for them through the mortgage.

This is good because the interest rate is lower than borrowing in other ways to pay those costs.

**Impact fees: Transportation**

Jim said that impact fees do not cover anywhere near the full cost of the transportation impacts caused by local population growth. The City of Olympia estimates the amount of new investment that will be necessary for arterials and intersections outside of the development that will need to be expanded in order to cover the cost of accommodating the increased population and driving originating within the development.

He said the cost averages about $40 million over a 6-year period. The City of Olympia assumes that state grants will cover about half of that cost, but that seems to be overly optimistic. The other half is used for calculating the local impact fees. However, the actual amounts that the City of Olympia has historically been collecting from transportation impact fees have been far, far lower than half of the total cost. Since transportation impact fees begin in 1992, the average has been less than $1 million per year and never more than $2.1 million. They keep estimating more revenue from the state than ever actually appears.

Jim cited an example of a roundabout at Boulevard Road SE and Morse Merryman Road SE. That project was put into the City of Olympia’s Capital Facilities Plan in 1996 to be built by 2001 for $175,000. Now it is finally being built and is likely to cost $4.5 million. Over the years inflation has occurred, and the design changed from an improved intersection to a more expensive roundabout. Another major cost factor has been that the storm water regulations have become tougher, so now it will cost a lot more to manage the storm water that will occur from the larger paved surfaces. The problem is that the transportation impact fees that were assessed in 1996 were locked into place to pay for a $175,000 project. Those impact fees are now grossly inadequate for the actual current cost. We can’t go back in time and increase those impact fees to meet the current costs. In order to cover those costs, the City of Olympia issued bonds that will be paid by everybody in Olympia.

Bob said that city governments and school districts routinely underestimate the amounts that developers should pay, so this causes much of those large costs to be dumped onto the rest of us. This pattern keeps recurring, so this makes it seem that they are catering to the developers. Bob said the calculations leading to the final cost projections have some uncertainty, so it would be reasonable to discount that by 5% or even 10% in order to avoid getting stuck in court disputes, but Jim said the discounts are typically 15%, which is too lenient toward the developers.

Jim added that only about 25 companies build the vast majority of the housing here. They deal with large amounts of money, so they are willing to invest the efforts into getting local governments to reduce the amounts charged to the developers. When the developers succeed in reducing their costs for impact fees, the actual costs are spread among 50,000 people in Olympia or 250,000 people in Thurston County. Each resident does not notice the small amount of extra cost, so ordinary people do not bother to deal with the issue. This leaves many thousands of us vulnerable to small amounts of extra costs, while the developers save much with practically no oversight from the general public. Glen said this is why it’s important for people to pay attention to this TV interview and to attend the Carnegie Group’s meetings.

Bob said he recently reviewed data and found that – if the population growth projections come true – Olympia should be collecting an additional amount of about $12 million more per year in each of the next 20 years. If the new developments do not pay those full costs, the huge remainders of those costs are imposed upon the rest of us.

**Impact fees: Schools**

Jim said impact fees fall far short of paying for the cost of schools needed for population growth. The fees are designed to pay for temporary portable classrooms, not permanent buildings, and not the rest of what a school needs (auditorium, lunchroom, office, library, etc.).

He said the Olympia School District provides high quality education, so real estate people use this as a selling point to potential customers. However, the real estate developers do not want to pay for that benefit.

**Impact fees: Other costs COVERED and NOT covered by impact fees**

Local population growth imposes other kinds of costs that are NOT covered by impact fees. Bob mentioned off-site facilities such as libraries, court rooms, jails, museums, and so forth.

Future fire stations to accommodate 20,000 additional people in Olympia will be paid for mostly by regular taxpayers, not by the developers who will be building and profiting by the new housing and other buildings.

**“Deep Throat” gave wise advice: “Follow the money.”**

Glen said that during the Watergate Scandal, “Deep Throat” gave good advice to the journalists who were trying to understand what was really happening, and how to trace the problem to its source. “Deep Throat” told the journalists, “Follow the money.”

I think this is good advice in many areas of public policy, including what we are discussing here now.

The biggest display ads in newspapers are bought by real estate agencies and car dealerships. Both kinds of businesses profit hugely by more population growth and sprawl. This probably causes newspapers to promote real estate in its news section and editorial page, too, in order to curry favor with major advertisers.

Bob said some people wonder why city staff seem to be pro-growth. He said that city staff in larger cities get higher salaries.

**The “Missing Middle”**

The City of Olympia is rushing to accomplish a major up-zoning that can disrupt neighborhoods. Both Jim and Bob have been speaking out clearly against this “Missing Middle” proposal. They have been criticizing the sloppy thinking and the likely injustices.

Jim acknowledged that we do have a need for housing for working class people. For a number of reasons, our traditional vision of a big home on a big lot is not pragmatic now for most people. It makes sense for our housing mix to include more small houses, mobile homes, apartments, duplexes, triplexes, and so forth.

Then Jim proceeded to identify a few things that are wrong with the “Missing Middle” proposal as a way to accommodate local population growth and housing diversity. He said it was a mistake to start with trying to locate this additional growth and housing anywhere within two blocks of existing bus routes. This is the wrong starting point, because bus routes are set by Intercity Transit, not by the City of Olympia, and also because buses are on wheels and bus routes can easily move to locations where we might rationally decide to put more housing. Transit is the most portable infrastructure, so it can easily flex to meet needs.

Jim said it would make much more sense to start by figuring out where our fixed infrastructure (water lines, sewer lines, schools, etc.) are already at full capacity (causing more growth to require very expensive additional capacity), and the specific locations where our infrastructure has unused capacity that could easily accommodate more housing without requiring more infrastructure investment. He said his neighborhood is such an example. It has wide roads, plenty of parking, more water capacity and sewer capacity than are needed, and it is within walking distance to three schools. But it’s more than two blocks away from a current bus route, so the City of Olympia is not considering that neighborhood as a place to add more housing.

Glen said that neighborhoods want more voice and empowerment over the decisions that affect their quality of life, but this is a “one-size-fits-everything” approach that tramples on neighborhood autonomy. Jim said that the “Missing Middle” scheme trumps the City’s previous commitment to “neighborhood-level planning.”

Bob said Seattle made the same mistake. They used to do neighborhood-level “sub-area” planning, and that worked very well. Recently Seattle’s mayor imposed city-wide changes that trumped those local values and caused a lot of problems.

Bob also said the worst impacts will occur in poorer neighborhoods with small older houses on large lots, because those would be torn down and replaced with multi-unit housing that would be more expensive to rent than the current houses.

He said small separate “Accessory Dwelling Units” – ADUs – have already been allowed for the past 25 years, so the “Missing Middle” proposal is not necessary for that reason.

The proposed new duplexes, triplexes, fourplexes and courtyard apartments will NOT be inexpensive.

Jim pointed out that some “Missing Middle” supporters are mistaken, because that proposal would not allow “tiny houses” on wheels. They can go only into what the zoning code refers to as RV parks, and they would be subject to the same kind of utility connection fees as other houses.

Glen said that the “Missing Middle” proposal is similar to many other public policy issues (foreign policy, etc.) in that what is said at the public propaganda level is very different from what the underlying, unpublicized reality and effects are.

Jim said the right way to explore major change is to begin with a scoping process that brings people together to identify the actual needs. Then assess the environmental aspects and implications, look at alternatives, and then – after all of this study – propose something that will be workable and meet the needs. He said the “Missing Middle” proposal was announced without having done either the scoping or the environmental assessment. It is ridiculous that the “Missing Middle” proposal was officially declared to have no significant impacts.

Glen said this seems very much like a “top-down” proposal rather than something that was developed by the general public from the grassroots level. This “top-down” approach immediately made me suspicious of it. Jim said some special interest groups have been working behind the scenes to push the City into their favored direction.

**How local governments SHOULD function regarding these issues**

Bob said local governments should include the public. The City claims that they hold public meetings, but the public is not allowed meaningful opportunities to actually shape the proposals.

Seattle’s Ballard neighborhood and Bellingham WA have suffered from this too. During our interview we mentioned the clever approach that some people in Bellingham have identified to satirize the process. The “Don’t Ballardize Bellingham” people created a 6-minute video that exposes the local government process similar to what happens in Olympia and elsewhere. It exposes the illusion that citizens have meaningful participation in planning/development decisions, etc. Watch this link:

[**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OEJ65CkeB8&feature=youtu.be**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OEJ65CkeB8&feature=youtu.be)

Jim said that the City of Olympia avoided the legitimate process that would have actually notified the public of proposed changes to zoning. Instead, the City is evading that good process by instead proposing text amendments that redefine what is meant in the wording about zones. This seems to be a way to inhibit public participation in making major decisions.

**Other thoughts**

Jim emphasized that the zoning changes that are being proposed need to be examined at a more granular basis. He also said the City of Olympia needs to vary the utility hook-up fees in various places. Extending sewer lines to the parts of the city that still use septic tanks will be very expensive. Look more specifically at where growth can be accommodated and where it would be too expensive.

Glen expressed appreciation for the local people who are paying attention to the kinds of issues we have been discussing, but he said that in many communities elsewhere the real estate developers and other special interests have free rein to manipulate and exploit the local people without anywhere near the amount of public oversight that is necessary.

**Sources of information**

I invite people to read and watch some good sources of information related to our topics.

Eben Fodor has written some interesting reports and documents. You could see some posted at [**www.fodorandassociates.com**](http://www.fodorandassociates.com) He conducted research on “The Cost of Growth in Washington State” for the Columbia Public Interest Policy Institute ([**www.columbiapolicy.org**](http://www.columbiapolicy.org)) and published a thoughtful report in October 2000. Many articles about the cost of growth are on his website. Most are copyrighted. [**http://www.fodorandassociates.com/rpts\_and\_pubs.htm**](http://www.fodorandassociates.com/rpts_and_pubs.htm)

You can learn about Olympia’s “Missing Middle” controversy by reading an article in Olympia’s alternative newspaper, ***Works in Progress***. It is available at this link: [**http://olywip.org/missing-middle-really/**](http://olywip.org/missing-middle-really/)

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**Closing encouragement**

Glen Anderson thanked Jim Lazar and Bob Jacobs for serving as guess for this interview, and he thanked the viewers for having watched.

The issue we have been discussing – just like the other issues we discuss on this TV series – needs active participation by ordinary people with good sense. Local governments can and do listen to well informed local people.

I hope our viewers will inform themselves, discount the propaganda, focus on the real issues, ground themselves in good values, and organize locally to press local governments to act more wisely to serve the broad public interest.

When we hear the dominant propaganda that “growth is good,” we need to question that assumption and think critically. Actually, growth imposes upon the rest of us a lot of hidden costs. The businesses that profit from local population growth try to convince us of benefits, but they avoid any honest reckoning of the costs.

We need to challenge the “conventional wisdom” that is conveyed to us by real estate developers, local governments and mainstream media. They all point one way. Actually, the reality seems to be very different.

Most people do not pay enough attention to public policy issues. When ordinary people don’t get informed and push back, the “special interests” can abuse us at our expense.

We can protect our local community – and strengthen democracy – by helping people understand the kinds of issues we have been discussing during this hour – and by helping people empower themselves to create a future that us sustainable and satisfying.

You can get information about a wide variety of issues related to peace, social justice and nonviolence through my blog, [**www.parallaxperspectives.org**](http://www.parallaxperspectives.org)or by phoning me at (360) 491-9093

We're all one human family, and we all share one planet.

We can create a better world, but we all have to work at it.

The world needs whatever **you** can do to help!