

# How Happy Valley Became Oregon's Fastest Growing City

By Mark Hurlburt



**Looking west towards Mount Scott, 1990**

*Photo by Bud Unruh*



**Looking west towards Mount Scott, 2014**

*Photo by Bud Unruh*

The City of Happy Valley stands at the top of Oregon's largest city population percentage increases since 1990. In 2017, the Portland State Population Research Center estimated Happy Valley's population to be 19,985 for an increase of more than 1,215%. Second place Sherwood grew 525% over the same period. Until the 1990's, Happy Valley's population growth was minimal. The first three censuses of the City counted 1,392 residents in 1970, 1,499 in 1980, and 1,519 in 1990. So, how did Happy Valley become Oregon's fastest growing City since the 1990's? First, we must understand why the City's growth failed to occur over a longer period of time.

Happy Valley incorporated as a municipality in 1965 to prevent a fate of being annexed into the City of Portland and to protect its character as a small, rural community of pastures sprinkled with houses. But the fight to protect that precious identity was not over. In 1977, most Happy Valley residents opposed a proposal to designate their City as part of the Portland metro area's Urban Growth Boundary.<sup>1</sup> The designation would have forced the City to permit development with an increase in property taxes. In 1978, the Metropolitan Service District included Happy Valley within Portland's UGB and the decision led to a fight over housing density.<sup>2</sup> In 1980, the City adopted its first Comprehensive Plan with a housing density of 2.4 units per acre.<sup>3</sup> However, that contrasted with the Land Conservation and Development Commission (LCDC) that Happy Valley's housing density should be six units per acre.<sup>4</sup> The dispute between the City and the commission lasted until 1985 when the two sides reached a compromise to increase the housing density to six houses per acre while including protections for the City's spacious environment.<sup>5</sup>

Another hurdle to clear before the City could grow was the lack of a sewer system. The LCDC required developable areas to provide such services. A 1987 City Council survey of 331 residents resulted in 72% favoring the continued use of private septic tanks over a proposed city-wide sewer system.<sup>6</sup> Michael Hurlburt, my father and Happy Valley home owner since 1970, explained that developers couldn't build because water would drain out onto somebody else's property and that residents didn't want to change over to the sewer pipe unless their septic tanks failed because of the costs to do so. However, public sanitary systems would be extended into the Happy Valley area and City growth was made possible by these extensions and others.<sup>7</sup> But development would remain slow until there was a change in City leadership.

From 1965 to 1994, Mayor Jim Robnett worked to delay urbanization for as long as possible.<sup>8</sup> His tenure ended abruptly in January 1995 when the City Council surprisingly elected Councilman Randy Nicolay as mayor. The council featured newly elected members who wanted to see change.<sup>9</sup> Had Robnett kept his job, a notable population increase still would have occurred due to new subdivisions built on land acquired by developers during his final mayoral years.<sup>10</sup> However, the growth likely would have been much less significant. The shift in city power gave development proponents more influence over the City's growth potential and proved to be a turning point.<sup>11</sup> Eugene Grant, who became mayor in 1999, favored development and annexation but also understood why Valley citizens desired for maintaining the status quo. He believed the City needed to manage, and not try to prevent, growth and change.<sup>12</sup> Happy Valley's population boom would be aided by the City expanding beyond its original "bowl" borders between Mount Scott and Scouters Mountain. In 2006, the City was 4,524 acres in size. As of 2017, the City is 7,372 acres.<sup>13</sup> As the City's total area has added existing populated land or developable property, it's seen concurrent population growth.

Despite the population boom, Happy Valley has maintained green spaces and livability thanks to regulations on development. In 2017, Steve Koper, Happy Valley's Planning Services Manager, explained that the City's Comprehensive Plan and Land Development Code preserves green spaces and natural areas by protecting and limiting development within areas of natural resources and steep slopes.<sup>14</sup> When overlooking the City "bowl," you can see the Valley's success

as a member of the “Tree City, USA” program. Happy Valley’s steep slope ordinance has also prevented subdivisions on the slopes of Scouters Mountain. Tree canopy and wildlife habitat persevere. Deer are occasionally seen crossing roads in the Valley’s bowl. These all contribute to Happy Valley’s uniqueness as a City, which can help explain why so many people want to live here.

Lastly, Happy Valley has seen its population rise due to a good reputation in the region as a great place to live. In 2002, Mayor Grant said that a significant part of the City’s growth was due to its reputation as a great place to raise children.<sup>15</sup> Almost all of Happy Valley’s schools have been built in the 21st century. Happy Valley’s access to I-205, the Clackamas River and Mount Hood territories, and employment opportunities in the Portland area, also add to its reputation as a desirable place to live. City Hall has also worked hard to maintain the City’s “smaller community” feeling. The fact that Happy Valley focuses more on feeling like a community than a city makes it a special place. Along with the land-use laws, sewer system, pro-growth officials, annexations, and strong reputation, help explain how Happy Valley became Oregon’s fastest growing city. Happy Valley has seen explosive growth since the 1990’s, but not at the cost of its quality of livability.

*Mark Hurlburt is a lifelong Happy Valley resident and the volunteer librarian in the Wilmer Gardner Research Library at the Museum of the Oregon Territory.*

## References

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