

# Larry S. Horowitz

Bellingham, Washington

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Via Email: [RMSepler@cob.org](mailto:RMSepler@cob.org)

cc: Greg Aucutt  
Lisa Pool

Re: ***Kamikazes for Growth... or Is the GMA a Suicide Pact?***

Dear Rick:

You know what would be really interesting? To listen in on the conversation between two cancer cells moments before the death of their host.

"Hey dude, where'd ya think we should **grow** now? **Up** or **Out**?"

"Um... hey, what was **that**?"

"Oh man, looks like we just overshot Wally's **carrying capacity**. Sure hope reincarnation's for real. Later, dude."

Makes you wonder if they even knew what hit them.

Surely society as a whole can do better. But reading today's headlines does give one pause:

[\*Under New Water Rules, Beverly Hills Must Turn Off Taps\*](#)

[\*Did climate change cause California drought?\*](#)

[\*Snow that replenishes Washington reservoirs sets record low\*](#)

➤ ***Have we humans become the tumor that will destroy earth's life-sustaining abilities?***

Everywhere you look, there are signs that the growth of the economy has outpaced the ecosystem's ability to support that growth. **Unsupportable growth is not sustainable.** On a global level, most people agree. But when it comes to acting locally, we experience group amnesia.

➤ **It is simply not possible to address the planetary limits to growth if every locale, including Bellingham and Whatcom County, promotes, advertises for, and subsidizes more growth.**

In Washington State, those who profit from growth reluctantly agreed to the *Growth Management Act* (GMA) because it was the lesser of two evils when compared with the ongoing spread of growth moratoria. To protect their interests, they required the GMA to include a built-in **suicide pact** that demands endless growth (even if that growth was metered out in never-ending 20-year chunks).

But does the GMA actually require us to act like mindless cancer cells moments before death?

➤ *Can we not look outside the GMA box and see we're at the precipice about to fall off the cliff?*



Are we not clever enough, independent enough, strong enough to halt this *GMA death march*?

In 1934, muckraking author Upton Sinclair wrote about his campaign for Governor of California in *I, Candidate for Governor: And How I Got Licked*. He wrote:

***It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it.***

In all jurisdictions, including Bellingham and Whatcom County, the various boards and commissions that advise elected officials are comprised of people who are most interested in those particular areas. Who do you think is most interested in *Planning & Development*?

In April 2004, Dick Conoboy posted an article on the local NorthwestCitizen blog entitled [Planning or Development Commission](#). According to Mr. Conoboy, “every member of our present Planning Commission is involved with or has/had close ties to businesses that owe their existence to development, i.e., consulting, construction, architecture, etc.”

I am not so naïve as to believe that any of these comment letters written about carrying capacity, limits to growth, steady-state economy, etc. will ever have any impact on recommendations by a planning commission that advises decision makers.

➤ But does our ultimate fate really require us to be *Kamikazes for Growth*?

***Are we not all in this thing together?***

What we need is a different conversation. One that honestly considers the basic premise of Eben Fodor's BETTER NOT BIGGER. I have appended a couple of items that may facilitate that conversation. Perhaps the City could sponsor an open house to facilitate it.

**In the meantime, the only sane recommendation is one that adopts the lowest possible growth forecast.**

Sincerely,

*Larry S. Horowitz*

In BETTER NOT BIGGER, Eben Fodor asks  
***Where are you on the Growth Spectrum?***

1. How much more traffic congestion would you like in your community?
  - a. There is already plenty of traffic, thanks.
  - b. Just a little bit more, please.
  - c. A whole lot more.
2. How much more air pollution and water pollution would you prefer?
  - a. We have too much already.
  - b. Just a little more pollution, please.
  - c. Give me toxic soup!
3. How much more farmland and open space do you want to be developed?
  - a. It would be nice if we could save what we have left.
  - b. I suppose we have to sacrifice this land in the name of 'progress'.
  - c. I can't bear the sight of undeveloped land going to waste.
4. How much higher do you want your taxes to go?
  - a. For what I'm getting, I think I'm paying enough already.
  - b. I'm happy to pay more, even if I can't see any benefits.
5. How much more of your local natural resources (fresh water, electric power supply, forests, aggregate and minerals) do you want consumed?
  - a. I'd like to conserve our natural resources and use them as efficiently as possible.
  - b. We have to sacrifice our resources to create prosperity.
  - c. We should sell all our natural resources for a quick buck.
6. Would you prefer that your city government continue to subsidize new development, or should they use the money to fund schools, extend library hours, offer day care at community centers, create cultural and recreational programs, and still have enough left over for a tax cut?
  - a. I'll take the expanded services and tax cut, please.
  - b. Let's keep the development fire stoked with my tax dollars.
7. How much bigger do you want your community to be?
  - a. It is already big enough.
  - b. Let's just keep growing and see what happens!
  - c. I love big cities, but am too lazy to move to one.

## TWELVE MYTHS of GROWTH

**Myth 1: Growth provides needed tax revenues.** Check out the tax rates of cities larger than yours. There are a few exceptions but the general rule is: the larger the city, the higher the taxes. That's because development requires water, sewage treatment, road maintenance, police and fire protection, garbage pickup—a host of public services. Almost never do the new taxes cover the new costs. Fodor says, "the bottom line on urban growth is that it rarely pays its own way."

**Myth 2: We have to grow to provide jobs.** But there's no guarantee that new jobs will go to local folks. In fact they rarely do. If you compare the 25 fastest growing cities in the U.S. to the 25 slowest growing, you find no significant difference in unemployment rates. Says Fodor: "Creating more local jobs ends up attracting more people, who require more jobs."

**Myth 3: We must stimulate and subsidize business growth to have good jobs.** A "good business climate" is one with little regulation, low business taxes, and various public subsidies to business. A study of areas with good and bad business climates (as ranked by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the business press) showed that states with the best business ratings actually have lower growth in per capita incomes than those with the worst. Fodor: "This surprising outcome may be due to the emphasis placed by good-business-climate states on investing resources in businesses rather than directly in people."

**Myth 4: If we try to limit growth, housing prices will shoot up.** Sounds logical, but it isn't so. A 1992 study of 14 California cities, half with strong growth controls, half with none, showed no difference in average housing prices. Some of the cities with strong growth controls had the most affordable housing, because they had active low-cost housing programs. Fodor says the important factor in housing affordability is not so much house cost as income level, so development that provides mainly low-paying retail jobs makes housing unaffordable.

**Myth 5: Environmental protection hurts the economy.** According to a Bank of America study the economies of states with high environmental standards grew consistently faster than those with weak regulations. The Institute of Southern Studies ranked all states according to 20 indicators of economic prosperity (gold) and environmental health (green) and found that they rise and fall together. Vermont ranked 3rd on the gold scale and first on the green, while Louisiana ranked 50th on both.

**Myth 6: Growth is inevitable.** There are constitutional limits to the ability of any community to put walls around itself. But dozens of municipalities have capped their population size or rate of growth by legal regulations based on real environmental limits and the real costs of growth to the community.

**Myth 7: If you don't like growth, you're a NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) or an ANTI (against everything) or a gangplank-puller (right after you get aboard).** These accusations are meant more to shut people up than to examine their real motives. Says Fodor, "A NIMBY is more likely to be someone who cares enough about the future of his or her community to get out and protect it."

**Myth 8: Most people don't support environmental protection.** Polls and surveys have

disproved this belief for decades; Fodor cites examples from Oregon, Los Angeles, Colorado, and the U.S. as a whole. The fraction of respondents who say environmental quality is more important than further economic growth almost always tops 70 percent.

**Myth 9: We have to grow or die.** This statement is tossed around lightly and often, but if you hold it still and look at it, you wonder what it means. Fodor points out, quoting several economic studies, that many kinds of growth cost more than the benefits they bring. So the more growth, the poorer we get. That kind of growth will kill us.

**Myth 10: Vacant land is just going to waste.** Studies from all over show that open land pays far more—often twice as much—in property taxes than it costs in services. Cows don't put their kids in school; trees don't put potholes in the roads. Open land absorbs floods, recharges aquifers, cleans the air, harbors wildlife, and measurably increases the value of property nearby. We should pay for it to be there.

**Myth 11: Beauty is no basis for policy.** One of the saddest things about municipal meetings is their tendency to trivialize people who complain that a proposed development will be ugly. Dollars are not necessarily more real or important than beauty. In fact, beauty can translate directly into dollars. For starters, undeveloped surroundings can add \$100,000 to the price of a home.

**Myth 12: Environmentalists are just another special interest.** A developer who will directly profit from a project is a special interest. A citizen with no financial stake is fighting for the public interest, the long term, the good of the whole community.

(Adapted from Donnella Meadows, *The Global Citizen*, February 25, 1999, " *Urban Growth Means Lower Taxes—and Other Myths* " Eben Fodor is a professional community planning consultant and an environmentalist, civic activist and grassroots organizer from Eugene, Oregon.).

Submitted by Mary Wentworth and Michael Burkart