The Oregon Land Conservation and Development Commission's (LCDC) approval of an urban growth boundary for the Portland metropolitan area in December 1979 was arguably the most important decision made during the course of implementing Oregon's statewide land use planning program, and also was a signal event in the history of land use planning in the United States. The boundary has achieved iconic status (Abbott and Margheim), its impacts have been very extensively studied, and implementation of variations of it have diffused widely. However, aside from a small number of relatively brief treatments, by, for example, (Leonard), and (Abbott and Abbott), there isn’t a detailed, comprehensive historical account of the politics of planning the original boundary.

This paper examines the history of the boundary development and approval process, a highly contentious, complex intergovernmental affair that began to unfold during the latter 1960s. It included federal and state government mandates to plan regionally, and, in Oregon, to comply with the nation's only set of legally binding statewide land use planning goals, one of which required a regional urban growth boundary in the Portland metropolitan area. The paper highlights the roles of planners working for the Department of Land Conservation and Development (DLCD), the staff agency for LCDC, planners working for the Columbia Region Association of Governments (CRAG) and then for Metro, which succeeded CRAG as the regional entity authorized by the state to establish and maintain the growth boundary, city and county planners and elected officials, and 1000 Friends of Oregon, the leading land use watchdog organization in the United States at the time.
The paper also addresses a set of central planning theory questions in the context of the history of boundary planning. (Flyvbjerg’s) argument that power shapes rationality provides conceptual grounding for the study. In the Portland case, the ways in which powerful actors sought to shape rationality at multiple spatial/governmental levels were visible to all participants in the boundary planning process and vehemently and explicitly contested. The conflicts between state-mandated regional-level growth management planning that was intended to discipline the development-inducing infrastructure projects sponsored by competing local governments is another important political and planning theory dimension analyzed in the paper, one that has roots that go back to the early 20th century (Peterson). The ways in which planners at different governmental levels interact with each other and with citizen activists are also analyzed.

The paper is based on extensive use of state, regional, and local archival materials, as well as on interviews with participants.


