In our view

More Industrial Jobs

When it comes to local economic recovery, boardrooms are just as crucial as bedrooms

Consider this tale of two counties: In 1990, Clark County had 84 jobs per 100 households and Clackamas County in Oregon had 85. In the next two decades, Clark experienced a virtual gold rush for housing, and the number of residential units soared as Clark accentuated its role as a commuter community in the greater Portland Metropolitan Area.

By contrast, Clackamas County took advantage of state and local land-use policies that emphasized commercial and industrial. And here's how the formerly similar counties compared in 2009: Clark County had dropped to 82 jobs for every 100 households while Clackamas had improved to 98.

Jump ahead to February 2011: Clark County's 12.9 percent jobless rate is worse than two-thirds of Washington counties, while Clackamas County's 9.6 unemployment rate is better than two-thirds of Oregon's counties.

Kindred spirits? No longer. It's high time for Clark County officials — led by county commissioners — to recognize that boardrooms are as important as bedrooms, even more important when you have too many of the latter.

Clackamas officials obviously understood that a balanced local economy is critical, and emphasizing residential development over industrial advancement creates a brittle local economy, one that prolongs a community's recovery from the Great Recession.

So here we all are. The nation still struggling economically but posting 14 straight months of private-sector job growth, while Clark County is mired in 28 consecutive months of double-digit unemployment. The short-term future is discouraging, to say the least. As The Columbian's Aaron Corvin reported Sunday in his ongoing series, "Clark County Getting to Growth," we've got the land but not the visionary land-use policies that are needed. The story offered this ominous quote from Scott Bailey, regional labor economist for the state Employment Security Department: "Given all the challenges in the current economy — the phasing out of fiscal and monetary stimulus, the continued weakness in the housing market, the extended fragility of financial markets, the drag from cutbacks in state and local government spending and perhaps federal spending — the odds of a recovery within even a five-year period are not good."

But it's not too late to get started. The determination of local leaders is manifested in several encouraging ways. County commissioners have created a task force to research how other counties use land-use codes to retain and expand businesses, with a mission to "concentrate on providing opportunities for manufacturing and industrial facilities that create sustainable, high-paying jobs." That's a refreshing and long-overdue deviation from worshiping at the altar of residential housing while ignoring the duty to provide places for those new homeowners to work. We hope this task force is paying close attention to Clackamas County.

Also, the Columbia River Economic Development Council is assessing the county's land supply and looking for ways to more quickly put parcels on the market for industrial or office development.

Another key ingredient in long-term recovery is prioritizing public education, lifting the local work force to a higher level than the current 15.5 percent of adults 25 and older with a bachelor's degree. Both Washington State University Vancouver and Clark College have shown progress in work force training. More is needed, and local legislators must lead the way.

So often on this page we extoll myriad examples of how our community is better than Oregon's. When it comes to creating industrial jobs, though, the best strategy is to turn an ear to the south, and listen to Clackamas.