

# The City That's Corrupt

By The Antiplanner | August 16, 2011 | News commentary, Urban areas

Portland, whose slogan, “The City That Works,” was stolen from one of the most corrupt cities in America, has been rocked by a new scandal, this one involving actual charges of bribery and under-the-table dealings. The FBI raided the home and office of the city’s parking manager to investigate allegations that he accepted large bribes to turn the city’s parking meter business over to a particular company.

These allegations apparently go back several years, but only now are being investigated in detail. What is interesting is how many Portlanders read the headlines and say, “yep, it must be true,” rather than, “this would never happen in our city.” A city that wastes huge gobs of money on silly streetcar and light-rail projects just exudes a culture prone to corruption. “Portland is one of the most corrupt and nepotistic city governments in America,” says former Portland planner Richard Carson, who walked away from a lucrative planning job because “I just could not compromise my principles for more money.” He specifically points to the city building a light-rail line after voters rejected it twice and taking money from water user fees to spend on pork-barrel projects as examples of that corruption.

He could also have mentioned doubling the size (and, ultimately, the vacancy rate) of the city’s convention center after voters rejected it; giving Bechtel a no-bid contract to build a light-rail line; claiming that streetcars stimulate economic development when in fact that development received hundreds of millions of dollars in subsidies; the transit agency general manager who oversaw millions of dollars in subsidies going to his family contracting business; and a 300 percent cost overrun on an aerial tram. The list goes on and on.

Portland Mayor (and alleged pedophile—and I don’t mean someone who loves bicycles) Sam Adams issued a statement saying that Portland and Oregon “prides itself on clean government,” but actually the city and state have a long history of corruption. There was the great land fraud scandal in which the state sold most of the land intended to support public schools for a song, which led to the indictment of most of the state’s congressional delegation. Most were convicted too, except Senator John Mitchell, who conveniently died before having to go to jail.

The city itself had a national reputation as a den of vice, with open bribery of elected officials, up through the 1950s, as documented in *Portland Confidential*, by reporter Phil Stanford, and *Dark Rose* by Gonzaga University history Professor Robert Donnelly. Until he was laid off at the beginning of the recession, Stanford’s column with the *Portland Tribune* frequently pointed out the direct links between the corruption of the 1950s and more-recent city governments. By itself, a bribe for parking meter contract doesn’t mean much. But when it takes place in a city that reeks with corruption under the guise of sustainability, livability, and other well-intentioned but ultimately inane ideals, it is just one more demonstration that we can’t count on government to solve our problems.

