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A Northwesterner's call to give sports fans a break



WASHINGTON — With some common sense and caring, Congress could help America's communities become more livable.

That's the claim of a freshman Oregon congressman, Earl Blumenauer. As an innovative

Portland city commissioner and before that a state legislator, Blumenauer spent years championing such causes as neighborhood-based city planning, efficient land use, light rail and environmental recycling.

Blumenauer lacks a powerful committee post or familiar Washington "clout." But he asks: Why *couldn't* Congress shift laws to give citizens meaningful input on land use and transportation decisions? Why couldn't it start practicing what it preaches on transit alternatives and clean air? And why not crack down on sports moguls who blackmail communities?

The idea's still tentative, but Blumenauer is talking of forming a congressional "Livability Caucus" to advance just such goals. Some early recruits, he hopes, will come from the ranks of the already formed Bicycle Caucus of members who enjoy two-wheeling their way around Washington and their hometowns.

The Blumenauer proposal surest to grab attention is his "Give Fans A Chance Act." Congress needs to act, he says, because while professional sports teams have become an integral part of communities, team owners have been able, by threats of moving, to get cities to pay out millions of their scarce dollars.

Since 1950, there have been 68 franchise moves in the four major sports leagues. Brooklyn still smarts over the 1958 move of its beloved Dodgers to Los Angeles. Baltimore was devastated when Indianapolis stole its Colts, and Cleveland when Baltimore stole its Browns.

It's time, says Blumenauer, to let fans have a first shot at buying any team that proposes to move. His legislation makes it illegal for any professional football, baseball, hockey or basketball league to prohibit public ownership of teams.

Indeed, before a league could approve a team relocation, it would have to weigh fan loyalty and whether there's a bona fide investor — government or private group — offering fair market value to purchase the team and keep it where it is.

What happens if a league ignores that requirement? Simple, says Blumenauer: It would lose the antitrust exemption (voted by Congress in 1961) that lets leagues and their teams collaborate on selling broadcast rights.

That would *really* hurt the owners. Last year, the National Football League alone earned \$1.2 billion by sharing broadcast revenues.

Only the legendary Green Bay Packers are owned by hometown investors now — a "grandfathered" exception to NFL rules. Passage of Blumenauer's bill would shrink the value of every existing franchise by thwarting the owners' game of threatening moves that cudgel millions from unwilling taxpayers.

Blumenauer argues the same principle — protecting communities — is behind companion measures he wants Congress to consider. Example: He'd oblige the Postal Service to observe the same land-use regulations — for trees, sidewalks, street im-

provements — that local governments require of their own departments or private businesses.

Another idea: to require the federal government, which tells private businesses around the country they have to promote ride sharing and public transit to improve air quality, to do more of the same itself.

Congress itself may be the worst example. The House offers members and staff free parking — but not free transit passes. Capitol Hill is so clogged with congressional autos, their places guarded by Congress' own expansive police force, that a visitor trying to find a private lot is likely to come up empty.

Blumenauer has a bill to provide transit passes to House employees who forgo parking rights. They could, he notes, use the \$10 billion Metro rapid rail system the taxpayers financed. With that passed, he'd like to get the Clinton administration to do the same for all government workers.

"If we do these things," says Blumenauer, "we can illustrate a federal partnership with livable communities and regions."

Philadelphia Mayor Edward Rendell raised some parallel ideas in 1994. Rendell

suggested the feds create a "powerful presumption" in favor of distressed cities when the location of federal jobs — new or old — is up for grabs. Or restore the federal Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credit, a huge boon to older cities' economies until Congress revoked it in 1986.

Blumenauer's idea is broader, though — it's about making all communities safer, more healthful and more efficient, by changing law and custom to give citizens more responsibility, and voice. And making government live up to its own rules.

It's a gospel Blumenauer picked up in Oregon's intensely participatory politics, in several years on the National Civic League board, and in continuing trips to communities across America, speaking on community livability issues.

This is a long way from traditional power politics.

But if it can advance more vibrant, self-sufficient communities, who's to say it's a bad idea?

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Neal R. Peirce's column appears regularly on editorial pages of *The Times*.

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By Neal R. Peirce