



Several communities in the U.S. have organized or are in the process of organizing themselves for Y2K contingencies: Medford, Oregon Boulder County, Colorado, Portland, Oregon, and others. Ann Arbor really ought to be among them. Here are notes on Portland, which could serve as models for us.

Portland Drafts Plans for Dealing With Y2K

The ambitious effort includes organizing neighborhoods to prepare for disruptions caused by the computer problem

By Steve Woodward of *The Oregonian* staff

This is not — repeat, not — a Y2K drill.

City officials are drafting ambitious plans to organize Portland's 200,000 households into small, self-sufficient units, marshaled by potentially thousands of neighborhood leaders trained to head off problems resulting from the Year 2000 computer problem.

If approved and executed beginning this spring, the effort would be one of the nation's largest municipal Y2K preparedness efforts.

"We're taking this seriously," Mayor Vera Katz said Thursday. "The purpose is not to raise a tremendous amount of concern, but to be prepared for an emergency. It doesn't mean it's going to happen."

Portland's approach, though mammoth in scale, will try to walk a middle ground between doomsayers who predict social collapse and naysayers who predict a colossal yawn on Jan. 1, 2000.

"It's a wonderful opportunity for us to prepare citizens for any kind of natural disaster," said Katz, who rallied citizens to action during the 1996 floods.

The City Council will be asked in coming weeks to approve as much as \$150,000 to finance the outreach campaign, including a full-time public information officer, a telephone-and-Internet referral network, a city Y2K Web site, outreach materials and assistance from the Global Action Plan for the Earth, an international environmental organization that created the community-organizing model.

With little more than 10 months left until the end of the 1990s, Portland citizens have been calling City Hall with fears about the local power supply, food and water availability, emergency services and other basic necessities.

Many callers worry that "significant social breakdown is a distinct possibility," according to a draft preparedness document that has been circulating among city officials this month. Katz hears from residents who are unnerved by "rumors, misinformation and speculation."

"They're very surprised about how many of their friends are thinking in survivalist mode," she said.

The source of fear is the Year 2000 computer problem. Computers that use two-digit dates, such as 99, may malfunction when the year rolls over to 00. They may read the new year as 1900 rather than 2000, resulting in consequences that Y2K pundits argue could range from misdated reports to complete shutdowns of systems that control modern civilization's vital functions.

The predominant view of city officials is that the risk of long-lasting, widespread Y2K-related failures is small, but that the dangers of bad preparation could be big.

If everyone hoards cash and gasoline, for example, the risk of injury from burglary or fire is "probably significantly greater" than breakdowns of bank ATMs or electrical failures, according to the draft preparedness document.

City officials sought out Global Action Plan after founder David Gershon recently unveiled his community-organizing model in testimony before a congressional Y2K committee. Global Action, based in Woodstock, N.Y., has been under city contract in Portland for the past three years to develop "Eco Teams," small groups of households that work together to pool resources and reduce waste.

The Y2K model calls for expansion of the Eco Team concept into groups of roughly 150 households, or about 10 city blocks, each coordinated by a volunteer block leader. The approach can also be adapted for individuals or for groups other than neighbors. Each group will receive a workbook and literature explaining the Year 2000 computer problem, potential consequences and appropriate ways to prepare for contingencies. Because nobody knows how long any Y2K-related disruptions may last, residents will be coached on how to prepare for failures of basic services that last for 72 hours, two weeks and two months.

"What we have in Portland is a city that is taking their charge seriously for taking care of their citizens," said Gershon, well known as a founder of the 1986 First Earth Run, a global relay that became the largest project of the United Nations' International Year of Peace. "Portland is setting a national precedent for how cities can prepare themselves."

Other large U.S. municipalities lauded widely for their Y2K preparations include San Diego; Montgomery County, Md.; and Boulder County, Colo.

The city's preparedness strategy would tackle the problem from two key directions:

First, the city wants to become a one-stop source of information on every phase of the Y2K issue that could have a major impact on residents. That would include not only the status of the city's own \$3 million Y2K repair effort but also the status of other local services, such as utilities, public safety, health care and transportation.

Second, the city wants to create a network of knowledgeable citizens who will lead others in preparing their own households and neighborhoods for potential disruptions in goods and services.

To organize nearly half a million residents, the city would enlist the aid of existing organizations, from the city's 93 neighborhood associations to Boy Scout troops to schools, churches and social clubs. Oversight of the process would fall to the city's Office of Neighborhood Involvement, which already oversees the neighborhood associations and community programs ranging from crime prevention to refugees to neighborhood mediation.

"My focus is on what's good, solid community preparedness," said Celia Heron, interim director of the Office of Neighborhood Involvement. "The solution to the (Y2K) problem and many others is neighborhood involvement."

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Y2K: An Opportunity for Community Organizing Around Transformational Politics by Kristine Pettersen

In writing about Y2K, I want to stress the importance it has for everyone. Y2K is not something that affects only the poor and hungry as do many of the issues middle class progressives are concerned about. Y2K has the potential to profoundly change the lives of all of us regardless of economic status. It will affect CEOs, high officials in government, stock brokers, corporations and the economic/political system as a whole. It is the perfect opportunity for forward-thinking people in Michigan to organize for a real change in social power structures. Institutions, large and small, including major corporations and government agencies are in big trouble and we now have the chance to build something new. Now is the time to create a new society based on principles of peace, justice and sustainability.

Second, I believe it is very important for community leaders and members in Ann Arbor to take a compassionate approach to problem solving and solutions. Some people will not be able to organize fast enough or will not have the resources to do so. We must reach out to one another as the date approaches, working with neighborhood and community groups to ensure that everyone gets their needs met.

Talking to people about Y2K in a friendly manner is a vital first step in organizing our community. I go to Jerusalem Garden almost every day for lunch and talk with people there about the issue. Places like J Garden are our community centers. I urge people to seek out other community centers and talk to people about Y2K. It is imperative that we start getting to know each other better and that we engage in Y2K discussions as soon as possible. Even if we experience no breakdown in the distribution of our goods and services, and all we encounter is a "bump in the road" beginning January 1st, 2000, it is at the very least emotionally necessary for us to communicate our fears of the worst-case scenario. This is not to say that we should dwell in our fears, but rather to air them out freely so as to dissipate them. If you already know about the potential seriousness of this problem and are convinced, you can skip to the next paragraph. Those of you who are unaware or in denial, please keep reading. How do you know if you're in denial? You're in denial if,

- 1) You dismiss the problem because it is only a possibility among many
- 2) You say you don't have time for Y2K
- 3) You say it won't affect you
- 4) You believe that "they" have fixed the problem
- 5) You are told by people in high positions of authority that your food supply might be cut off for a "little while" after the year 2000 hits and you do not react with complete terror.

Again, I stress the importance I feel this issue has for our community not only because of the very real threat of infrastructure systems breaking down, but also because the idea of social breakdown is powerful. The worst thing we can do is sweep it under the rug and go on with "business as usual." It's not in this town's character to ignore social ailments anyway. We have a radical past. The seeds of that past are still here—buried and awaiting resurgence. They are in the liberal institutions like the Ecology Center, the Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice and the myriad of progressive student groups on campus. Now is the time to start watering the seeds and watching our consciousness and radicalism grow.

The flip side of the Y2K fear I am finding in myself, is the fear I have of true radicalism. I fear the possibility of slavery ending. I fear the idea of living in basic harmony with our environment. I don't believe the world can ever really change for the better so I settle for moderate reforms. I see myself as an isolated individual rather than someone deeply interconnected with others from all over the world. I chalk up ideas of serious revolution and profound transformation to idealistic, wishy washy, "pie in the sky", bleeding-heart liberal optimism. When I get like this, I know I am not living by my true values. In my heart, I want to strive for ideals regardless of the outcome, but in some other place in me, I fear real change and I don't believe humans have it in them to transform. I tell myself that oppression and hardship have always existed in human societies so it inevitably will always be this way

and there's nothing I can do to change such entrenched social patterns.

We, I mean the vast majority of AGENDA readership, generally believe that it would be a wonderful thing if we stopped racism, environment destruction and social injustice. We romanticize the past so easily, wearing hippie clothes, yet deep down we don't know what it truly means to be radical and we're afraid to know. Our lives have become too comfortable for the collective good in this historical moment. The sooner we can get in touch with our basic values of cooperation, social justice and peace, the better off we'll be in responding to the possibility of major computer failure around the world. "Think globally and act locally" is a catchy phrase that many of us like to espouse, but when it comes right down to it, we are extremely afraid of what that may mean.

Community is not about hanging out with folks like us. It is about working in cooperation with people who are different from us but have similar needs and goals. Diversity abounds in our community and it is time that we truly celebrate it and tap into its resources. The only way we'll make it through this is if we work together, side by side, with people we wouldn't normally choose to be around. I believe, in the end, that personal, racial, religious, sexual, and political diversity is necessary for our survival. And it is beautiful too. There is a rainbow right here in Ann Arbor just waiting to be noticed and appreciated on a more profound level—on a Y2K level.

I believe that as the millennium approaches, we are making paradigm shifts in our collective thought patterns. This is scary to many people. But we must move with the times if we don't want to be swept away by the wave. Other species adapt and evolve in times of great environmental change as well. Changing our patterns is a part of life. I'm thinking of the first amphibians who were living in tide pools by the ocean. If some of them had not adapted and evolved to the changing circumstances of their environment, they would have been swept away by the waves. They never would have made it out of the ocean and onto the land. It is our turn to make such a leap in evolution. It is written into our DNA to adapt to survive. We cannot remain entrenched in old patterns that will not function for us in the near future. Just as the amphibians did it, so must we. But making a leap takes a conscious effort on our parts to really carry the species to the next level. This article is meant to be an invitation to start the process here in our town.

I've been reading in the Utne reader's Y2K guide lately. There is a lot of good information in that little orange booklet. I urge all Ann Arbor community activists and organizers to get a copy and to start implementing the plans in there. The psychological consequences and process outlined in the booklet are of particular interest to me. It is important to allow ourselves to go through the stages of denial, anger and disbelief without harsh judgements about "overreacting" as we move through this. The more we have our feet firmly planted on the ground, the more relaxed we are when problem solving, the more likely we will act rationally and intelligently in the face of Y2K.

Finally, I'd like to say that I want to watch gardens grow and people play in the park. I want to enjoy myself and others. I want to share my love and be loved. And I see these things being threatened by Y2K, just like the white middle class activists of the 60's felt their very lives were being threatened by the Vietnam War. We have come a long way since the navete of the 1960's and I believe it is imperative that we have a political analysis behind our idealism. But we need to imagine, just as they did, a new world, a better world, a world of peace and beauty. A world where people care about each other, help each other and understand how deeply connected we are to one another. In short, a world beyond Y2K.

Slowly but surely we can come to insights and solutions together. The people of Ann Arbor are a good people with a good history. Trusting ourselves, being confident in ourselves as a community is going to really help us later on. Let's keep the dialogue open! Come to Y2K meetings at Arbor Vitae above Wazoo records on State Street at 7:00 p.m. on Thursday March 4 and March 18. The address is 336 1/2 S. State.