

Cultural Magnets

And other downtown priorities

Who are we, where are we, where are we going – downtown? As most Eugeniens are returning from their August nap, the mayor's West Broadway Advisory Committee's two-month public input process is drawing to a close. Time now for the WBAC to begin writing up its recommendations to the Eugene City Council.

You'll recall the charge to the committee was to counsel the council in five areas: recommended uses, parking, open space, transition for existing businesses and design elements. A hard-working, dedicated group it turns out has come up with some surprises. Let's look in on their report as it is being prepared.

Uses:

Mixing uses recommended, by which we mean mixing uses across the area, not always stacking them vertically in a building.

Residential is our top priority use for the inner downtown. We expect the West Broadway area to do its share toward the repopulation of the core. Yes, it costs more, but the extra investment in inner city density is needed to help meet the council's goal for smart growth that reduces sprawl. We recommend population targets for the inner downtown and investment in projects that help us meet that goal.

Since retail services usually follow rather than lead in mixed use developments, a 50,000 to 60,000 square foot Safeway-size grocery store is inappropriately scaled to the area and won't pencil out unless the city gives away the store. To summarize:

"Building a market where there's no market for a large magnet market is a markedly misreading of the market." Try to say this quickly.

We are unanimous in our preference for cultural anchors over retail anchors for West Broadway. We'd like to support our talented local theater companies with a 350-seat theater on Broadway (sing out: "On Broadway, on Broadway...") as good as the Wildish. We'd like an Art Museum as good as the one in Reno; a new DIVA complex; and a UO-LCC downtown center to enhance day and night activity.

These are the kind of magnets, like our library, that draw people to them and around them. Retail anchors are retro, shopping center ways of thinking and require Costco scale parking. Time to let this thinking go. Please!

Is it too late to recognize that office uses such as the proposed ORI building would have increased daytime activity **and** demand for more downtown living options? Overheard: "Would you have considered living downtown?" "Sure. Give me a decent apartment with a view of the South Hills close to work and a Metropal Bakery truck on the street each morning and I'll sign up right now."

Parking – Recommendations:

Not so many. We should take greater advantage of being right next to the LTD and EmX station. The projected need for 600 new parking spaces would overload and dominate the area. At one full block of parking = 325 cars, it would require an entire block of cars two stories high (or a quarter block stacked up), only one layer of which could be underground because of the high water table.

The problem is the large number of spaces – 4 spaces per 1000 square feet required for retail and commercial uses. A greater emphasis on housing at an average of .75 cars per unit would cut parking demand down by as much as two-thirds, most of which could be built below grade.

The missing piece of the transportation puzzle – the WBAC wasn't supposed to think outside its box - is a Willamette St. shuttle connecting the growing population of downtown dwellers to existing services throughout the Willamette St. corridor. Such a "trolley" strategy would further obviate the need for a large grocery store, its acre of parking, and a need to duplicate other existing services in the center city. Tate dwellers, for example, could walk up to Adam's Place, for a drink and trolley home.

Open Space:

Finish the Downtown Open Space Plan so that it can be used as a guide for open space development in this SW sector of the downtown. Each sector of the downtown has its appropriate open space contribution to make and role to play. The NE sector, for example, already has our Park Blocks. Transfer responsibility for the development of the plan to the talented and capable people in Parks Planning where it belongs.

Absent a plan, the committee suggests these minimum requirements for the W. Broadway area: A small public square related to the EPL with a fountain, benches and sculpture; a large mural; assorted small art; interior pedestrian ways; Great Streets that celebrate the differences between residential streets (Charnelton), commercial streets (Broadway, Willamette and Olive), and institutional streets (10th Ave.); appropriate private and public courtyards, forecourts, entrances, and terraces to add sunlight and amenity to higher density urban living; new lights and other street furniture; quality materials and appropriate plantings.

Merchant Transitions:

It was bound to happen. Someone on the committee discovered the wonderful selection of cheeses at the Kiva. Another stopped in for Friday wine tasting with Angus at the Broadway Market. Still another took up the Tango.

Thus the realization that it would be wise for the city try to help established merchants remodel, expand and adjust as needed rather than subsidize the kind of competition that inevitably shuts them down. R. I. P. Flicks & Pics. Admiration and respect for our mid-size markets and our Bijou should be at the heart of downtown development, not a subsidized predation that undermines local businesses with public dollars.

Design Elements:

Conserve as much of our architectural heritage as possible and build new buildings that are real buildings, ones that we might look back on in 50 years, like the Washburne and Center Court buildings, as potentially worthy of historic conservation. Avoid the life-style, formulaic, Potemkin fronts of a nostalgic Main St. that are all the fashion. (We've fallen for the "everyone is doing it" before.) We want to look forward while we remember to bring up our rear.

The committee felt the frustration of trying to evaluate a plan that was still percolating, but in retrospect that may have been just as well. It has given us time to talk about our downtown preferences, who we are and where we want to go. These are our preferences.

Bring us a plan along these lines and watch our town light up.