

Downtown Apples

Suppose two-thirds of the people who came into your store told you they didn't want apples. You could spin that any number of ways: "...damned bunch of utopians and lefties, small-thinking incremental creeps, cheap skating, worm-worrying fruit-haters," but eventually you'd have to admit that the overwhelming majority of your shoppers just didn't want apples.

A smart shopkeeper would turn quickly and try to offer them something they did want. Why is downtown so different?

The dream of downtown as a retail center in the older sense that Main Street was the town's retail center dies more slowly than Boris Godunov. I shopped in those yester years at Penny's and the Bon, bought shoes at Burch's, and had my pants altered at the tailor's above Seymour's. The mix of national and local stores wasn't an issue then and it isn't now. At least it wasn't for me until Burch's stopped carrying my shoe size and explained it this way:

"Look, Mr. D, we sell 100 pairs of shoes to people with fat feet for every pair we sell to people like you, so we can't afford to keep your size in stock any more." And so like everyone else I got in my car, drove free, parked free and shopped elsewhere.

I liked this summary in a recent letter to the editor, "I'll tell you what happened in three words: Valley River Center." Concatenate that admirably abbreviated history with, "and Internet shopping," for the rest of the story. I need more than fingers to count the number of times the UPS and Fed Ex trucks come to my street these days. Recently I shopped locally to replace a watchband that was wearing out – went to several local stores and was told that 17mm wasn't a popular size so they only had one to offer. Guess what arrived in my mail a few days later.

People from all parts of the city, not just the left side or the right side knew instinctively that the retail dream of Eugene's downtown's golden past wasn't coming back, not even if we threw a lot of money at it. And \$40-70 million seemed like a lot to throw after something disappearing at the speed of light.

Do we want and deserve a great downtown? Could and would our community find a way to pay for it? I think we do, could, and would - but not if we remain obsessed with urban renewing those same old apples.

I've been saying, "For god's sake, for goddess' sake, get a new idea!" And people have been responding, "So what's yours, [expletive deleted]?"

And so I tell them that I think we've grown past our present Downtown Plan and need a new and better one, one that sets out firmer public commitments to those things that will make downtown humane, urbane and beautiful - and a model of sustainability for others to copy. Maybe even help us live up to the "World's Greatest City for the...". Outside substantial investment needs to see those firmer commitments. No one, for example, is going to invest in Glenwood if we don't fix Franklin Blvd.

And so we are back to asking ourselves what we would build there if we were not being ideologically bullied into subsidizing development that cares mostly about moving the most product or squeezing the most dollars

out of each square foot. Imagine this: a downtown Eugene we really wanted to live in, work in, dance in and visit rather than a downtown we were told we had to accept or abandon our economic religion.

I'm betting we are ready to agree on some basic principles. For one: Downtown Eugene needs more people living and working there. All kinds of people, not just the present foreshortened segment of the population. Town and gown might have more in common if students and faculty actually lived downtown. It's past time for a new hotel to support our upcoming Trials, Festivals and further aspirations.

Greater urban amenity IS the necessary flip side of greater urban density. Ever walked down Market St. to San Francisco Bay? Ever taken a walk along the Oklahoma City or San Antonio millraces, I mean canals?

Local services for an expanded downtown population would naturally follow, including those like Jane's Alterations at VRC that already attract people (who are in the know) from all over the region. Big 55,000 sq. ft. grocery stores aren't the answer. Look at what's happened recently to Ray's in Santa Clara where there was plenty of free parking.

The WBAC didn't agree with me, but public monies need to be channeled into a range of public attractors downtown: a park and open space system, not just wider sidewalks; a new 350 seat theater; an art museum-DIVA complex whose roof doesn't leak; a downtown UO-LCC center, and maybe like Springfield, a downtown public high school; a Sustainable Trolley system that starts by uniting and activating Willamette St. as an urban service corridor and later extends down 5th to the waterfront. And an enhanced downtown riverfront; a Millrace urban watershed restoration; a Skinner Market Square and new park on a recaptured N. Park Block; a new and/or newly remodeled-augmented City Hall.

Our new plan needs a more elaborate understanding of what makes up a city framework. It needs more committed, cultural flesh on its bones. A framework of just streets and developable blocks is a bloodless subdivision and not a city.

“As the times are new, so we must think anew.”

Who said that anyway? I think he stopped a civil war.