Downtown Eugene

On The Bright Side—
A talk with Ray McIver

by Sonja Ungemach

Downtown Eugene has seen its share of economic problems. Faced with the competition of Valley River Center and other suburban shopping centers, along with the persistent downturn in the local economy, many downtown merchants and professionals have moved out, leaving store fronts gaping. In spite of the pleasant park-like atmosphere of the mall, plus the many interesting and unique shops and restaurants which are still there—and thriving—the downtown as a whole has definitely seen better times.

Perhaps no one is more aware of the situation than Ray McIver who has served as Executive Director of the Eugene Downtown Association for the past eight years. At the end of this month, Ray will be leaving his position with EDA to go into private practice as a marketing and promotions consultant. As part of that practice, he will continue to work with EDA, as a consultant, helping association members collectively work out appropriate marketing plans.

Correct marketing is, according to McIver, the key to downtown economic success. Downtown does not have to wait for the large major department stores to locate here in order to draw the shoppers, as some have maintained. In fact, says McIver, this "shopping center concept"—of having one or two "anchors" with a chain of smaller shops in between—is not necessarily right for a downtown. And consumer trends indicate a moving away from the shopping center towards the specialty atmosphere typical of downtowns. So, the marketing of downtown should be custom designed for the independent businesses which exist there.

"Downtown businesses *can attract* a reasonable number of people *if* they will depend on their own advertising and marketing, and therefore are guiding their own destiny. . . . Then when the anchors show up, they'll be strong and supported because they've already made a dent in the awareness of people by doing their own marketing."

McIver sees himself as the "cosmic glue" that could bring together the varied entrepreneurs downtown with the skills they need to market their own businesses. "I don't want to be an advertising agency. . . . We have an abundance of advertising agencies, yet they're not structured to help the mom & pop situations that need their help the most. I'd like to offer a new process where mom and pops can tap into really professional services but not have to pay the tariff themselves. Well, the only way I know to do that is through some sort of collective."

Ray has already done a lot for downtown. Under his direction, EDA has sponsored or supported numerous projects designed to bring people downtown—the pushcart program, street performers, summer theatre on the mall, bedraces, the Imagination Celebration, and support for the Hult Center, to name a few. "I'm Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and bedraces," quips Ray.

McIver admits to being an optimist, with ultimate faith in capitalism—"if done the right way"—and in the independent entrepreneur. "These people are really heroes. They've chosen the toughest route of all which is to be physically, mentally, *totally* responsible for their lives in owning their own businesses. . . . They're totally invested. Well, I happen to believe that total contribution is what makes the difference—that's what makes things happen."

McIver also favors some degree of management downtown. If shopping centers can be likened to well-manicured gardens, downtowns tend to be meadows—where nature just runs its course. Some place between the two is where this downtown ought to be, says McIver. "Maybe you need a 'master gardener' in this downtown—not to destroy the entrepreneurial spirit and take over, but to be an assistance so that when people land, they land right—the seed falls in the right place."

The City of Eugene, also a major downtown player, has this year created the position of Downtown Manager, launching a new level of public/private partnership with downtown businesses. On Saturday, that joint effort will be recognized and celebrated with a day of festivities downtown—music, theatre, crafts, food, wine tasting, and an unveiling of a new downtown logo. The event is called "All Dressed Up and Some Place to Go!" See accompanying article and schedule for details.

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