

# BACK TO THE FUTURE

## Redefining the Downtown Mall

**The Mall is a special place, a vital element in Eugene's distinctive quality as a community and destination point attraction.**

by Bill Snyder & Sonja Ungemach

Eugeneans seldom sit back and watch things happen—especially when popular institutions are threatened with change. So it is with the current proposal to reintroduce traffic to Willamette St. through the Downtown Mall; it has created a heated controversy among downtown businesses, property owners and citizens.

### Some History

By the mid-1960's Eugene's downtown had deteriorated. Suburban shopping malls, especially Valley River Center, enticed shoppers and merchants away from downtown. Urban Renewal provided federal dollars to re-develop and revitalize the central business district. Free parking, the central plaza at Broadway and Willamette, and a park-like pedestrian mall were this community's response to the phenomenon of aging and dying downtowns nationwide.

By the late 1970s, business on the Downtown Mall was booming. The early 1980s, however, brought a severe and lasting recession to Eugene and Lane County. Businesses everywhere suffered—especially downtown.

The community responded by mobilizing behind pro-business and pro-growth philosophies. Citizens supported private and public development aimed at economic diversification including: The Hult Center, widening of 6th and 7th Avenues, re-introducing traffic between 10th and 11th on Willamette Street, and re-building the '60s era airport.

Now the Mayor, city development staff, and some downtown property owners and merchants

support re-opening Willamette St. to traffic between 8th and 10th as a means of revitalizing the Downtown Mall.

### The Proposal

In early 1986, the city commissioned a study by Seattle architect and urban planner Don Miles and Associates to evaluate some proposals for updating the Mall. The result of that study was a recommendation to reintroduce traffic on Willamette Street between 8th and 10th Ave., along with other improvements, to create a more modern and appealing "streetscape." Elements of the proposal include a narrow two-way street, brick paving, extra wide sidewalks, parking spaces and drop-off bays, and a consistent design theme for benches, lamp posts, and landscaping. The central fountain would be leveled, and a new and smaller one built to the east of the new street. The plaza-like character of the Broadway/Willamette intersection would be maintained; Willamette Street would be closed to traffic during public gatherings such as the Eugene Celebration. New restrooms would be built near the central plaza to replace those torn down last spring on the Broadway portion of the Mall. The cost of the project is estimated at \$1 million.

The Don Miles study also included recommendations for design improvements to Broadway. Those improvements were recently completed and cost a little over \$600,000.

The Mall projects are being paid for by tax increment financing: downtown property tax dollars earmarked for capital improvements in

the downtown area. Downtown Development staff person Richie Weinman explains that this money is already in the City budget, and that no additional or new taxes would have to be levied.

Weinman cites increased accessibility and visibility as major reasons for opening the Mall to traffic. "Whether we like it or not, people have love affairs with their cars. They like to see where they are going before they leave the security of their vehicles."

He also points to a study which shows that malls as large as this one, that run in more than one direction, have been generally unsuccessful, nationwide.

Weinman expects property values on Willamette Street to go up as a result of the re-opening, creating a larger tax base from downtown properties.

The City's Downtown Development Department would like to see the southwest corner of 8th and Willamette, now a parking lot, developed in the near future. According to Weinman, the opening of Willamette would be the carrot to attract developers to that prime location.

### Public Opinion

A group of community leaders active in creating the Mall 18 years ago has organized as the Friends of Downtown Eugene to oppose the opening of Willamette Street to traffic. They believe that the Mall is a special place, a vital element in Eugene's distinctive quality as a com-

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