



Photo by Nick Lacy

The Mall

1972

Mall: Keeps downtown Eugene 'in business'

Editor's note: The following is the first of a two-part series on the Eugene downtown mall. The stories below deal with the history of the mall and city officials' reactions to the success or lack thereof of it.

The sequel, which will appear in Thursday's Emerald, will deal with general community reaction to the mall.

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Of the Emerald

The Eugene Urban Renewal Project, of which the downtown pedestrian mall is the most prominent feature, was approved at the City Council meeting of Dec. 19, 1968 with an apparently broad-based show of unanimity.

At that time there was indeed justifiable concern for the future of the then rapidly decaying central business district. The Eugene Fire Chief stated at the same meeting that "downtown Eugene is a serious fire hazard" and that the city had forbade the use of the upper floors in many of the area's buildings.

In addition Valley River Center along with other more convenient shopping centers was siphoning off a good deal of business from the downtown area.

Saves business district

The \$18 million plan developed from 1966 to 1968 by the Eugene Renewal Agency (ERA) was considered to be the solution to the demise of the central business district. Despite the cost of the project and the qualms of many citizens over federal government funding of two-thirds of the financing, there seemed to be no other way to keep downtown Eugene "in business."

However, the attitude of the community during the winter of 1968-69 was one of optimism, for there was undeniably an innovative approach to be taken in the future planned development of Eugene.

The spirit of progress was somewhat dampened by the realization that many of the decaying edifices slated for destruction constituted an integral part of the history of Eugene. One building, the Smeed Hotel, was symbolic of the controversy over the historical value of the old buildings.

Another historical building, the Titus Building, was built around 1890 and it served originally as a livery and later as a Western Union telgraph office.

First buildings

The businesses located in these old buildings were relocated, many with the help of the ERA, to make way for the new pedestrian mall.

The Eugene Register-Guard assured its readers in a Dec. 22, 1968 editorial that the project was "no boondoggle," and that benefits would result "for practically all the city's residents."

Aside from the concrete benefits of insurance savings for homeowners living close to an area that had not been allowed to deteriorate was the additional parking facilities planned for downtown shoppers.

The paper argued that there were to be the amenities of the mall and its landscaping, along with the new civic center and auditorium. The citizens of Eugene were asked to look to their northern neighbor of Portland for the obvious evidence of the benefits from a thorough urban renewal project.

The editorial continued, saying that such a comprehensive plan was a better approach to the development of Eugene than the piecemeal method which had created the problems in the first place. The Register-Guard was

confident that Eugene could be proud that it had now focused its attention on its future.

Groundbreaking ceremony in 1970

In May of 1970, a groundbreaking ceremony marked the beginning of construction and months of rubble, disarray and confusion in the downtown area. The hazards of shopping amid the construction were as bad for business as the traffic and congestion had been earlier.

The main sections of the mall were finished and dedicated on Feb. 13, 1971. A three-day celebration following the dedication ceremony featuring performances of a band, several dance troupes and the New Oregon Singers. There was a fireworks display from atop Skinner's Butte as a tribute to the new mall.

Dedication and anti-war protest same day

Ironically the day of dedication was also the day of the first anti-war protest in the mall. Though there were only about 20 protestors and their actions didn't seem to detract from the enthusiasm of the crowds, the demonstration was somewhat prophetic of the problems in store for the mall.

In all, the celebration was a success. The businessmen were faced once again with crowds of shoppers and the mall was no longer a plan but a reality.

Still under construction, the mall is being extended in coordination with the redevelopment of buildings downtown, according to Don Hulbert, community relations advisor to the ERA. The completed mall will cover

eight blocks with Olive closed to 10th, Broadway closed to Oak, and Willamette closed to 8th.

To be continued in Thursday's Emerald.



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