

The Mall: the heart of the city

Early in 1970, downtown Eugene looked like any Main Street, USA. Four-lane traffic, parked cars, bicycles and pedestrians congested the streets. The scenery consisted of traffic lights, stop signs, theater marquees, business signs and power lines. The buildings in the downtown area were of various ages, some newer, some very old, some attractive, some not so attractive.

Friday and Saturday nights, the downtown area turned into a drag strip. The sidewalks were crowded with young people who used the area as a hang-out.

If you take yourself downtown now, you'll wonder if it's the same city. Pleasant fountains, trees and flowers, comfortable conversation places and play areas for children occupy the lanes between the stores. Many of the stores are new or remodeled.

That may seem like a quick transition, but, as with many other things, doing it didn't take nearly as long as getting ready to do it. The Eugene Mall had been talked about for 20 years.

One version of a mall was tried in 1949 and another in 1959, when a temporary mall was set up during a two-week closure of Broadway.

In 1966, a Community Goals Conference was held to set up priorities and ideas as to what community people wanted the city to be. One of the goals was to develop a mall to separate pedestrians and traffic.

Once the goals were adopted, the next step was to decide how to go about physically reconstructing the downtown area.

A survey and planning application was filed with the federal government renewal program. It was approved for \$480,000 in 1966.

Citizens participated in the first stages of the planning phase, which lasted from December, 1966, to October, 1968.

Through a careful back-and-forth planning process, with planners making recommendations and the community giving ideas, most of the opposition to the mall had disappeared by the time the plan was actually adopted.

"The Eugene Renewal Agency is the builder-developer of the mall. Once an area is completed and inspected it is turned over to the city. The city parks and recreation department is in charge of maintaining the mall, watering the trees and shrubs, keeping the area clean and scheduling activities," says Don Hulbert, community relations advisor to the ERA.

The Eugene Renewal Agency is a seven-member commission appointed by the mayor and the Eugene City Council. Before the agency came into being, the city council acted as a renewal agency.

"Part of Eugene Renewal Agency's goal is architectural excellence. We attempted to provide some continuity without similarity

in the designs of the buildings," says Hulbert. Some of the businesses that were already on the mall invested money in renovation or redecoration to improve their buildings.

Besides the building improvements, the mall was designed to provide a space in which pedestrians are free to move in, around, and through. Seating areas are placed in strategic locations to offer pleasant views and protection from sun and rain. Play areas offer parents and children time out from shopping. Public telephones, a self-service postal station and public rest rooms are available.

The Central Plaza, at the intersection of Broadway and Willamette, is the focal point of the mall. It serves as an assembly place and can be used for exhibits or other forms of entertainment. A second-level viewing platform at the southeast corner of the plaza provides cover below. Bulletin boards are available at the Charnelton Street entrance on Broadway and on Willamette Street near 10th Avenue. The overpark at 10th and Oak provides 600 parking spaces.

The mall covers approximately five acres. One and a half blocks are finished. Several areas will be opening this summer, including the portion of the Portland Federal Savings building not occupied by the bank, the Sahlstrom building, the EYE-ARC building which houses an optometrist and an architect, Asian Gardens at 7th and Willamette, the new version of Ming's restaurant, and phase two of the MJ Center. The mall is expected to be completed in 1975 and the Urban Renewal project in 1976.

Some city ordinances govern use of the mall. Animals, except seeing eye dogs, are not permitted in the mall. Nor is bike riding or climbing any tree or structure other than a stairway, except in authorized play areas. A "no excessive touching" ordinance prohibits licentious behavior.

The mall is available for activities, but activity permits must be obtained through the Parks and Recreation department at City Hall. Sue Douglas, information coordinator, says that the mall has been used in the past for "promotion for plays, an Oregon Museum of Science and Industry picnic, performances by musical groups including religious, chamber and rock music, political speeches and promoting various causes, from Wounded Knee to pro-Vietnam war activities." The park department is considering the possibility of using the mall for various displays, Douglas says.

A park-like atmosphere prevails in the mall and shopping is pleasant, the pace leisurely. There is no evidence of the concrete-and-exhaust nightmare that downtown Eugene used to be.

Terri Scarborough



The mall is for the young and old.

Photo by Nick Lacy