

Area housing future grim

Money woes hurt downtown living

By SUE KEIM
Of the Emerald

Housing growth in central Eugene looks pretty grim, according to city officials who have surveyed building opportunities within five blocks of the downtown mall.

"We can't imagine what could be worse in terms of housing right now," says Robin Johnson, a member of Eugene's Joint Housing Committee, which offers tax exemptions and revenue bonds to those wishing to develop housing in Eugene.

"The big problem is money," says City Councilor Emily Shue, "because our local resources are drawn out."

Private interests and governmental regulations use to prohibit downtown housing construction, "but now there's just no money," Johnson says.

Incentives for less expensive housing don't go far beyond the financing granted by the joint housing committee because of priorities set earlier by the council and the Eugene Renewal Agency, Johnson says.

Expansion in downtown Eugene — which includes the new performing arts center, a hotel-conference center and a new Nordstrom department store — can "enhance (the area) by providing shopping, but also can inhibit housing by using up available land," says Mike Tharp, an ERA committee member.

The entire downtown area is zoned for high-density building, says Johnson, but no provisions have been made for strictly residential use in certain areas. "Eugene had one of the last zoning codes in the U.S. that didn't provide for residential downtown housing," she says.

"We found that tools you have in the downtown area can be incentives," says Patricia Decker, a city planner who, along with Tharp, surveyed housing in downtown Eugene for the council and urged the ERA to provide development incentives.

The ERA has begun work on a mixed-use building, with retail shops on the ground level and 40 to 60 residential units on the upper floors, on property it owns on 11th Avenue and Willamette Street, Tharp says.

"This will provide opportunities for local developers by providing land to them for less than the actual market value," Tharp says.

Construction costs for this type of housing are high, Schue says, but they are even higher for anything beyond four stories. "There are not many 10 to 15 story high rises in Eugene downtown because there are not many construction companies that can afford to build them."

Condominium development will become more attractive to Eugene developers, says Shue, "because there's not much money in rentals anymore."

Conversion from rentals to condominiums, similar to the conversion underway at Willamette Towers, will rise "as long as they follow our (the condominium conversion task force's) set of rules," Shue says.

Local developers continually attack zoning and parking limitations in the downtown area and the city council needs to look at some kind of change in those regulations, Johnson says.

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Eugene also needs more innovative parking facilities, says Tharp. "You're in a bind when you can't provide the parking demanded by the city and your tenants."

Downtown housing is necessary, says Schue, but downtown housing studies need to answer two questions. "First, 'who's going to live downtown?' You almost have to treat those who live downtown like they work downtown when you consider parking rules. And, second, 'what are the provisions for children?' I don't know if any kids will be located downtown."

"Central downtown has gotten an unfair share of bad publicity," Tharp says. "The ERA would like to see downtown as a more desirable place to live and to visit at any time of the day."

"I have no better crystal ball than anybody else when looking into future of downtown housing," Schue says.

"I just wish we'd been thinking about downtown housing about five years ago," says Johnson, "when so many barriers, especially money, didn't exist."

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