

Conflict

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tom floors paid \$50 a month in rent.

A covered walk between the building and other nearby structures made the area dark and isolated, a comfortable haunt for a variety of homeless people. A nearby playground was devoid of children, a place where drug deals went down.

Today, the athletic club is considered an anchor on Eugene's downtown mall, drawing wealthy businesspeople and their families to the area.

Many city officials believe Bennett's intentions were good and his role as a private developer of the athletic club took a back seat.

Bennett "is not in public service for the almighty dollar," said City Councilor Cynthia Wooten. "I believe in Rob personally, and it's difficult for me to say that he manipulated the situation to his advantage."

At the same time, Wooten admitted she feels "slightly queasy" about Bennett's involvement in Eugene's business world.

"He's not self-serving, but I just feel real uncomfortable sometimes about his role as a developer," she said.

When Bennett's financing package went before the City Council in February 1985, Wooten spoke out strongly against the city's heavy financial investment in the project.

"I represented a ward that was having a public pool closed down because there was no money," Wooten said. "I was really concerned about extending that much public money into a private club into which the public couldn't step."

Wooten ended up voting to approve the package, which passed unanimously.

Few city officials appear to believe that Bennett had any conflict of interest or that the city overstepped its role. But Hill said "the mumbling of the citizens" leads him to believe otherwise.

John van Landingham, who served with Bennett on the Community Development Com-

mittee, believes there were few drawbacks to the plan.

"The government assists business in a lot of ways all the time," van Landingham said. "I don't feel that what the city did was inappropriate. Their goal was to help our downtown... and I don't know that I can think of anything better to get people downtown than an athletic club."

John Ball, a Lane County commissioner who also served with Bennett on the Community Development Committee, said he can see why the public would be upset at using public funds to build a private athletic club, but the results have been positive.

"There were a lot of people speaking out against the loan," Ball said.

Some were private health club owners who felt the issue was one of unfair competition, Ball said, and others were concerned about using community development funds for that purpose.

"Whether he is feathering his own nest at public expense... is something that could be debated," Ball said. "The controversy was over using that money for trendy urban

professionals to have a club."

Ball said he understands that view, but the issue must be taken in a larger context.

"You also have to look at what the facility means in terms of improvements to downtown redevelopment," he said. "The success of the club and the businesses surrounding it give the impression that maybe it worked."

The club's membership has surpassed 1,400, and manager Jon Voget expects membership to reach the club's capacity of 2,000 by the end of the year. The club is looking into the option of expanding into some nearby properties, although Voget refused to specify which ones.

While he doesn't mind a little honest competition, Jack Kirkham, the manager of Oakway Spa, said he has some problems with the preferential treatment the Downtown Athletic Club received.

"It's like we're paying taxes through our business to support theirs," Kirkham said. "I guess some people just know how to milk the system."

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