

New plans, tenants create hope for struggling downtown Atrium

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Emerald Contributor



Photo by Sean Poston

The development of suburban shopping malls have led to hard times and a lack of tenants for downtown retail centers such as The Atrium.

The Atrium, a retail building in Eugene's downtown, was quietly busy with people lounging outside, a few customers at the ice cream store inside and tavern employees making ready for the lunch crowd Friday morning.

Nestled next to the empty building that used to be a Sears store, The Atrium typifies Eugene's downtown: half-full and seeking a renewed identity and commercial vitality.

Two weeks ago, Eugene voters narrowly approved a ballot measure to change urban renewal plans and this may signal a change for The Atrium and other downtown businesses.

"I've worked downtown since 1950," Bette Sandall, Atrium manager said. "We all used to go out and shop for dresses on our noon hour and it wasn't just us (downtown employees). It isn't like that now."

Sandall said The Atrium has many good tenants and has some good prospective tenants as well.

Sandall said "mall rats," or loitering youths, have been a problem and she needed to hire

security guards and close the public restrooms because of vandalism.

Jan Hohman, development analyst for the City of Eugene Planning and Development department, said hope exists for The Atrium by "maybe re-designing retail space and encouraging other tenants such as non-profit organizations."

ECO NW, an economic consultant firm, is located in The Atrium. "Because it's central to our employees, we enjoy being downtown and it's nice office space with affordable rent," Helen Rosenau, ECO's administrative manager said.

Russ Isbell, of Ted Durant and Associates in Portland, is formulating marketing strategies for The Atrium's new owner, Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance Company in Hartford, Connecticut.

"They (Connecticut Mutual Life) should have a plan in the next 90 days. Then we'll have our marching orders to begin formulating our market strategy," Isbell said.

"We don't think it's a dead building," he said. "We think some prior ownership problems may have contributed to the problem."

"We expect 90 percent occupancy within the next 18

months," Isbell added. "The 'downtown is dying' idea has been around for the last 20 years but we don't believe it."

But Everett Smith, University geography professor, said the retail outlook for middle-sized American downtowns is not good.

Between 1967 and 1972, retail sales sagged in Eugene's downtown, rising somewhat between 1972 and 1977. Between 1977 and 1982, sales continued to slowly increase, Smith said.

Even with the sales gains between 1972 and 1982, Smith said, sales were well below what was expected and the national consumer price index.

Smith said retail business is undergoing a decentralizing trend, indicated by the development of shopping malls in the 1970s and the current boom in suburban shopping center development.

Businesses like the new Costco and Shopco on Coburg Road, the new Fred Meyer and Safeway on West 11th Avenue, and the Springfield Mall on Gateway have displaced big retail centers downtown.

"I guess these buildings (like The Atrium) just don't work as they are perceived anymore," Smith said.

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from the gang at work

Friday, June 1, 1990