

COMMUNITY

Commissioners pledge mall support

By Chris Bouneff
Emerald News Editor

Lane County commissioners tried walking the political tightrope Wednesday morning by pledging money to "significantly assist" the city of Eugene in reopening the Downtown Mall.

Eugene voters will decide on May 21 whether the mall should be reopened to motorized traffic. The proposed redesign would open portions of Willamette, Olive and East Broadway streets.

Commissioner Chairman Jack Roberts, who represents Eugene, originally proposed last week that the county use road improvement funds to cover up to \$3.2 million of the project's costs.

But at Wednesday's meeting Commissioner Steve Cornacchia proposed an amended resolution also calling for the use of county road funds for the mall. However, this resolution did not specify an amount.

The board also mandated that the Eugene City Council prioritize road improvement projects for the city before coming to the commission with a funding request.

"We do not know in relation to all metropolitan projects that this is the Eugene City Council's number one priority," Cornacchia said.

Moreover, Cornacchia said the county should avoid the appearance of meddling in Eugene politics.

"We'd be unnecessarily placed in the political debate of whether the streets should be opened," he said.

Commissioners Ellie Dumdi and Marie Frazier supported Cornacchia's proposal, citing similar reasons. Commissioner Jerry Rust joined Roberts

in wanting to allocate funds before voters cast ballots.

Proponents of opening the mall said the campaign's debate will not focus on the county's offer to use road funds for the proposed redesign.

Mayor Jeff Miller, who with councilors Kaye Robinette and Shawn Boles attended the meeting to show their support for Roberts' proposal, said the campaign issue will now be whether to open the mall and not where the city will find funding sources.

"It helps the discussion be where it needs to be," Miller said.

Miller described the downtown redesign as his top priority, and he called the commissioners' unanimous vote a positive sign for downtown revitalization.

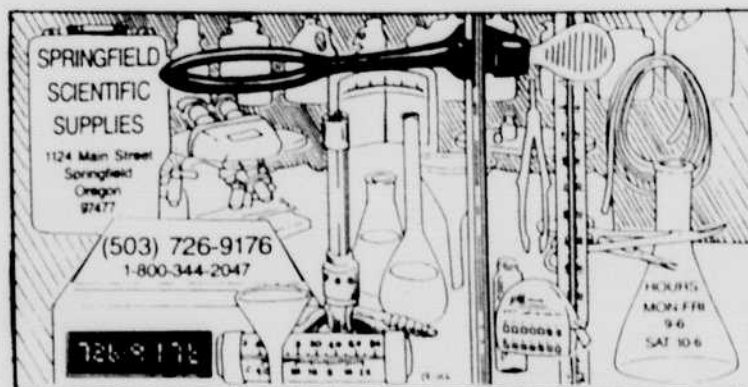
"People are leaving (downtown); people are not there; there's no people who want to invest because there's no accessibility," Miller said.


Opponents of the redesign, who also opposed using county road money to fund the redesign, were not taking the county's pledge of financial support as a setback.

"(The redesign) affects only two city blocks," said Ed Aster, who is a major downtown property owner. "Regardless of where the money comes from, people don't want to see their money spent that way."

Aster said commissioners acted responsibly by not appropriating funds before the May 21 vote and in asking the city to assess its needs before receiving county road funds.

"They're asking the City Council to show some backbone and lead in prioritizing their needs," Aster said.





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