

Open Willamette to traffic, business

Eugene voters will be voting in May whether or not to open a two-block stretch of Willamette Street through the downtown mall. The Eugene City Council decided Wednesday to place the measure on the ballot. The area has been closed to traffic since 1970.

The advantages to opening Willamette Street to traffic are numerous. The downtown area desperately needs to be revitalized, and the extra traffic that people driving cars would bring to the area may help to spark new business to existing shops, as well as draw new retailers to the area.

Shopping in downtown Eugene can be an exercise in futility, as there are no longer major stores downtown. To shop at a department store these days, one has to visit Valley River Center or Gateway Mall. The only retailers downtown are smaller, independent stores that badly need more business. When people in Eugene think about shopping, they rarely consider the downtown area. In its current form, downtown doesn't have much to offer.

Over time, and with the opening of Willamette Street, downtown can thrive as a bustling business district. Stores will move back if that is where the traffic and the money are. Neither are currently there, nor are the businesses. It just doesn't pay.

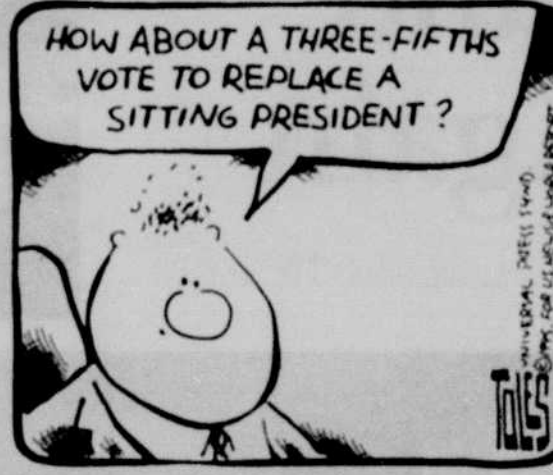
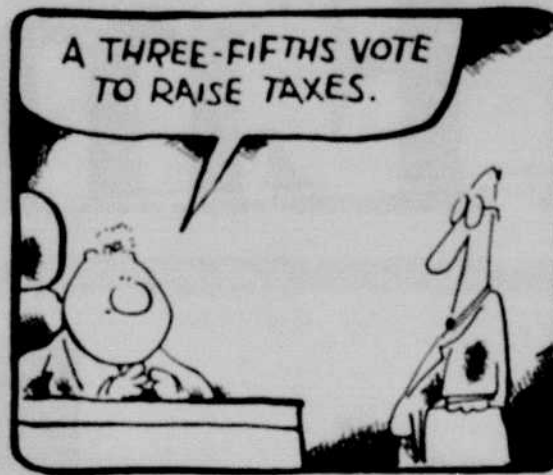
Having Willamette Street closed may make an environmental statement opposing cars and make it easier for pedestrians to move among the stores downtown. It may even make the area look a little nicer. However, in a business sense, it just isn't logical. One can't expect customers to work harder and walk farther to get to businesses. Businesses have to make it easier for customers to spend money.

As good an idea as it is to open Willamette Street, the City Council shirked its responsibility when it decided to refer the decision to voters. The Council should have taken it upon itself to make a decision on opening Willamette Street, but it instead decided to dump the whole issue into the laps of the voters. The Council showed a lack of decisiveness when it referred the issue to Eugene voters. They should have decided the issue themselves.

Opening Willamette Street would not be without flaws. Added traffic to the street would probably prompt construction of new businesses along the route, thereby reducing access to the area. It will also cost money to open the street again.

Despite the cost and possible temporary inconveniences of construction along the route, it makes sense to reopen the street to traffic. Without the traffic that added access to the route would bring, fewer people will visit shops in the area and downtown Eugene will fall into an economic downturn.

Open Willamette Street to traffic. Both businesses and customers will benefit from the convenience.



OPINION

Aggressive panhandlers annoying



JOE HARWOOD

For most students, the path to obtaining that magic piece of paper signifying the successful completion of four or more years of academic hell is fraught with obstacles and sacrifices. Some work one or more jobs to meet the costs of attending, and others mortgage their future by taking out student loans. Many use both avenues to scrape by.

All would agree the personal and financial commitment in winning that degree, or license to work and wear a tie as I like to call it, is not an easy road to travel. That's why many begin but only few finish.

In light of the intense motivation required to simply stay in school, much less excel academically, I always wonder why students choose to support the non-working crowd of beggars, thieves and panhandlers ringing East 13th Avenue and surrounding locations.

Unbeknownst to the majority of students, the area surrounding the west University neighborhood is considered a high crime area by police and city officials. Certainly, a handful of obnoxious students contribute to this stigma. But a far worse problem lies with the transient beggars, who daily accost students for spare change.

One need only peruse the daily police logs for proof: Drunken transient urinates on sidewalk. Transient cited for shoplifting at the Bookstore. Transient arrested twice in the same week for peddling drugs. Transient arrested for harassing a student. Transient arrested for trespassing. The list could go on to fill up the rest of this paper.

Probably the worst location for

the University's own gaggle of losers is the intersection of 13th Avenue and Alder Street. During daylight hours, students regularly have to plow through the pack of street urchins hanging out on the sidewalk in front of the 7-Eleven store. These folks sport dreads, filthy clothing and the newest fashion craze among the terminally lazy and malnourished dogs.

One asked me on Monday for "spare change to grab a bite to eat." Now when I first moved to Eugene, I actually gave my change to panhandlers — mainly out of pity. That practice ended when I followed one into Safeway and saw him buy a 40 ounce bottle of Olde English 800. It's hard enough buying beer for myself, much less some loser allergic to work.

So anyway, I told the guy asking for money to eat his dog if he was so hungry. The response didn't go over well. In fact, it was followed by an overt threat of bodily harm, to which I then responded with an equally profane threat of my own.

Such goes life on the street.

After living around the University for a short time, most quickly tire of the endless begging and stop giving. If the University student population could somehow organize a blanket boycott of furnishing panhandlers with change for even a week, many would pack up their mobile homes, er, shopping carts and find greener pastures. I'm talking about a Yellowstone-type scenario where visitors aren't allowed to feed the bears and those bears eventually quit begging for food.

Some say we should exercise compassion and mercy, helping those less fortunate. Fine with me. Donate to legitimate causes like United Way or the Century Coalition.

On Wednesday, as I walked down to Smith Family Book Store to buy a book, four different dweebs asked me for spare change. None had dogs, so I couldn't recommend canine

casserole again. Instead, I utilized a common tactic: Look right through the waste of skin and carbon molecules as if he didn't exist. It usually works.

But Wednesday was different. One touched my arm and repeated the request for cash. Not wanting to get into a shouting match, I continued walking. Which brings to mind the final stanza of a haiku an alcoholic friend recently wrote:

"Spare some change brother?"
I looked at him while laughing,
"Change comes from within."

Students complain of the constant begging, yet police were limited in the remedies they may apply to panhandlers, limited that is, until Thursday when the City Council final found its proverbial brass balls and acted to discourage panhandlers.

The enactment of Eugene's "aggressive panhandling" ordinance will hopefully spell doom for the urban parasites leaching money from those students and community members daring to walk the streets.

While the new ordinance doesn't outlaw panhandling altogether, it makes certain behaviors illegal. Actions like "offensive physical contact" and preventing people from walking down a sidewalk unimpeded will result in a penalty of up to \$1,000 and 100 days in jail.

But police cannot cite a person under the new law unless an officer witnesses the offense or the victim signs a complaint, in essence, making a citizen's arrest.

So at the end of February when Eugene police start enforcing the law, remember that there is now a remedy. If a panhandler gets out of hand, call the police and wait around to sign a complaint.

And while you are waiting, offer suggestions on your favorite doggie dish; it might make for some tasty vittles after he gets out of jail.

Joe Harwood is a columnist for the Emerald.

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